

Breast Awareness and Pap Smear

Australian women have access to high quality national screening programs for breast and cervical cancers. Regular screening saves lives. Women aged between 18 and 70 should have a Pap smear every two years and those aged between 50 and 69 should have a mammogram every two years. Women of all ages should be aware of how their breasts normally look and feel and promptly report any new or unusual changes to their doctor.

Breast cancer

Changes in the breasts can be due to many factors. The most common are normal hormonal changes related to the monthly period, pregnancy or menopause and changes due to ageing. Only a small proportion of breast changes will be due to cancer. However, it is important that breast cancer is detected as early as possible to provide the best chance of successful treatment and recovery. Breast cancer becomes more common as you grow older, so knowing what is normal for your breasts is just as important after menopause.

Breast awareness

Every woman should be familiar with her own breasts. By knowing what is normal

for you at different times of the month and at different stages of your life, you should be able to find any unusual changes in your breast.

How to examine your breasts:

- Look at your breasts in the mirror – look at the shape, size and skin of your breasts and nipples. Are there differences between the two breasts or nipples? If so have they appeared in the last few months?
- Feel your breasts from time to time, while dressing, bathing or showering. Remember that your breasts extend to under your collarbone, up under the armpit and include the area around the nipples

- You may prefer to examine your breasts every month in a more systematic way.

Changes to look for include:

- A new lump or lumpiness especially if it is only in one breast
- A discharge from the nipple
- A change in the shape or size of the breast or nipple – this might be either an increase or a decrease in size
- A change in the skin over the breast such as redness or dimpling
- An unusual persistent pain, especially if it is in one breast
- Lumps or thickening in the armpit
- Swelling or pain in the upper arm
- Ulcers or sores which do not heal.

See a doctor as soon as possible if any changes are noticed. Although the majority of these changes will not be due to breast cancer, it is important that all breast symptoms are carefully investigated.

You may also wish to have a clinical breast examination by your doctor once every year – discuss this with your doctor.

BreastScreen (mammogram)

A breast X-ray called a mammogram is the best early detection method available for reducing deaths from breast cancer, especially in women aged 50–69 years. It can detect early changes

that may be breast cancer, even where there are no symptoms.

- It is recommended that all women aged 50–69 years attend the BreastScreen Australia Program for free two-yearly mammograms.
- Women aged 40–49 and 70 years and older are also eligible for free two-yearly mammograms. If you are in these age groups and do not know whether to have regular mammograms, you should discuss the potential benefits and downsides with your doctor.
- Women of all ages who are at increased risk of breast cancer (e.g., with a strong family history of breast cancer) should consult their doctor about developing a personal monitoring program. This may include regular clinical breast examinations, mammograms and/or ultrasounds.

A doctor can arrange a mammogram or you can go to BreastScreen in your area – no referral is needed. After the first mammogram, your name will be placed on a register so that you can receive a reminder when the next mammogram is due.

For more information or to arrange an appointment, phone 13 20 50.

Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable of all cancers. Deaths from cervical cancer have steadily decreased in Australia since the introduction of

the National Cervical Screening Program in 1991. Screening for cervical cancer is possible because the cervical cells pass through a series of detectable changes before they become cancerous. Treatment at this stage is usually simple and successful.

Pap test

What is a Pap test?

- The Pap test is a simple screening test that can find early changes in cervical cells before they develop into cancer.
- During the test, a doctor or nurse practitioner takes cell samples from the surface of the cervix and puts them on a glass slide. The slide is sent to a laboratory for analysis and results are usually available within a week.
- Most women do not find the Pap test painful, but it sometimes can be uncomfortable. If it does hurt, tell the doctor or nurse straight away.
- A small number of Pap tests show changes in the cells of the cervix. Most of these changes are minor problems which can be easily treated or clear up naturally. In a very small number of cases the changes may develop into cervical cancer if left untreated. If your Pap smear shows an abnormal result, you will be referred for further tests.

Who should have Pap tests?

- All women from 18 to 69 years of age who have ever had sex are advised to have a Pap smear every two years. Of women who die from cervical

cancer, about 90% have not had regular Pap smears. The Pap test is currently the best protection against cervical cancer for women who have ever had sex.

- Young women who have had the cervical cancer vaccine should still have regular two yearly Pap tests, as the vaccine does not protect you against all cancer-causing HPV types or those to which you may already have been exposed prior to vaccination.
- Some women who have had a hysterectomy may still need to have a Pap test every two years and should ask their doctor for advice.
- Most cases of cervical cancer occur in women older than 40 years. After menopause you still need to have a Pap test every two years.

Where can you have a Pap test?

- Pap tests are available through your GP, family planning clinic or health or medical centre, generally at no cost. However, check when making an appointment.
- Pap smear registers are now in operation in each State and Territory as part of Australia's National Cervical Screening Programme. Registers keep a confidential record of your Pap smear results. When you have a Pap smear you will automatically go onto this register for reminders and follow up if necessary unless you specifically ask to be excluded.

For more information

BreastScreen Australia – National breast screening program. Information and appointments
Phone: 13 20 50

Cervical Screening Program
Phone: 13 15 56
Website:
www.cervicalscreen.health.gov.au

Breast Cancer Network of Australia
Phone: 1800 500 258
Website: www.bcna.org.au

Breast Health website
Website: www.breasthealth.com.au

Family Planning Association – listed under 'F' in the white pages of the phone book
Website: www.fpa.net.au

Healthdirect Australia
Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)
Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information
Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre
In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: