

# GPs – here's how to help your patients understand their breasts

When to check their breasts

How to check their breasts

“If you can press the squashy breast away its okay -  
If you can't and it feels hard, get it checked straight  
away”

This is a guide on how to help your patients understand how to check their breasts produced by the registered charity Bust (breast unit support trust) Bristol

[www.bustbristol.co.uk](http://www.bustbristol.co.uk)

# Breast cancer facts

- Breast cancer is common as women age
- Most women are not aware of the best way to check their breasts
- They have a quick prod in the shower when they remember, often when one breast is tender and lumpy
- They then find something that feels like a lump
- This often causes panic because they haven't checked for months!
- The instant fright makes the lumpiness worse due to physiological changes

# Why do breasts become painful and lumpy?

- The female breast is a highly specialized secretory organ composed of many small units or lobules designed for milk production under the control of oestrogen and prolactin.
- This is in preparation for breast feeding
- Milk production is ongoing from puberty to the menopause and if women are taking HRT.

# Why do breasts become painful and lumpy?

- Fundamentally, during the menstrual cycle the ovaries are producing hormones preparing the body for pregnancy, a part of which is milk production. The milk cannot escape from the nipple, and this accumulation causes pain and lumpiness.
- Stress can exacerbate this via prolactin production. Prolactin was designed to keep women breast-feeding when food was scarce. Prolactin makes the breasts more sensitive to oestrogen and, therefore increases pain and lumpiness.

# Why do breasts become painful and lumpy?

- What makes this normal activity more frightening for women is that one breast is always more active than the other, and therefore the pain is often worse in one breast.
- Finally, because the breast started off life under the axilla before migrating down the chest wall before birth, any pain in the breast will often be referred from the nipple to the axilla, which many women are aware may be the site of spread of breast cancer.
- What may have started as a harmless irregular period, with a slight excess of oestrogen, or stress due to changing jobs, moving house or a bereavement, may escalate to an anxious woman frightened by the pain, with added stress making the situation worse.

# Why do breasts become painful and lumpy?

- Sometimes production of milk may result in a single milk duct blowing up into a cyst, which is a simple harmless collection of breast "milk"
- The symptom of pain alone is rarely a sign of breast cancer. However, it may not be enough to simply reassure a woman that she does not have cancer without helping her understand the underlying cause, as this may result in anxiety and more pain.

# Why do breasts become painful and lumpy?

- Breast pain and lumpiness can occur after the menopause when the ovaries stop making oestrogen, and the cyclical pain stops. This is due in part to the increasing levels of oestrogen in our diet.
- In this situation, there is some evidence that changing to organic dairy may help, as there may be fewer oestrogenic hormones in organic dairy products.
- Also, after the menopause, oestrogen is still made in fatty tissue, and losing weight will also help reduce the problem.
- Finally, many women believe soya milk helps – however it is oestrogenic, and this may well be a complicating factor.

# Why do breasts become painful and lumpy?

- The importance of understanding and being able to explain to patients, why the breast may feel lumpy just before a period or when suffering stress, is to help women understand that this is normal, and not a sign of cancer.



# Guide to Happybreasts

The next slides explain to women how and why they should examine their own breasts and can be used as an educational tool.

BUST is working on a more user friendly way of presenting this information.

# Happybreasts

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# Why examine your breasts

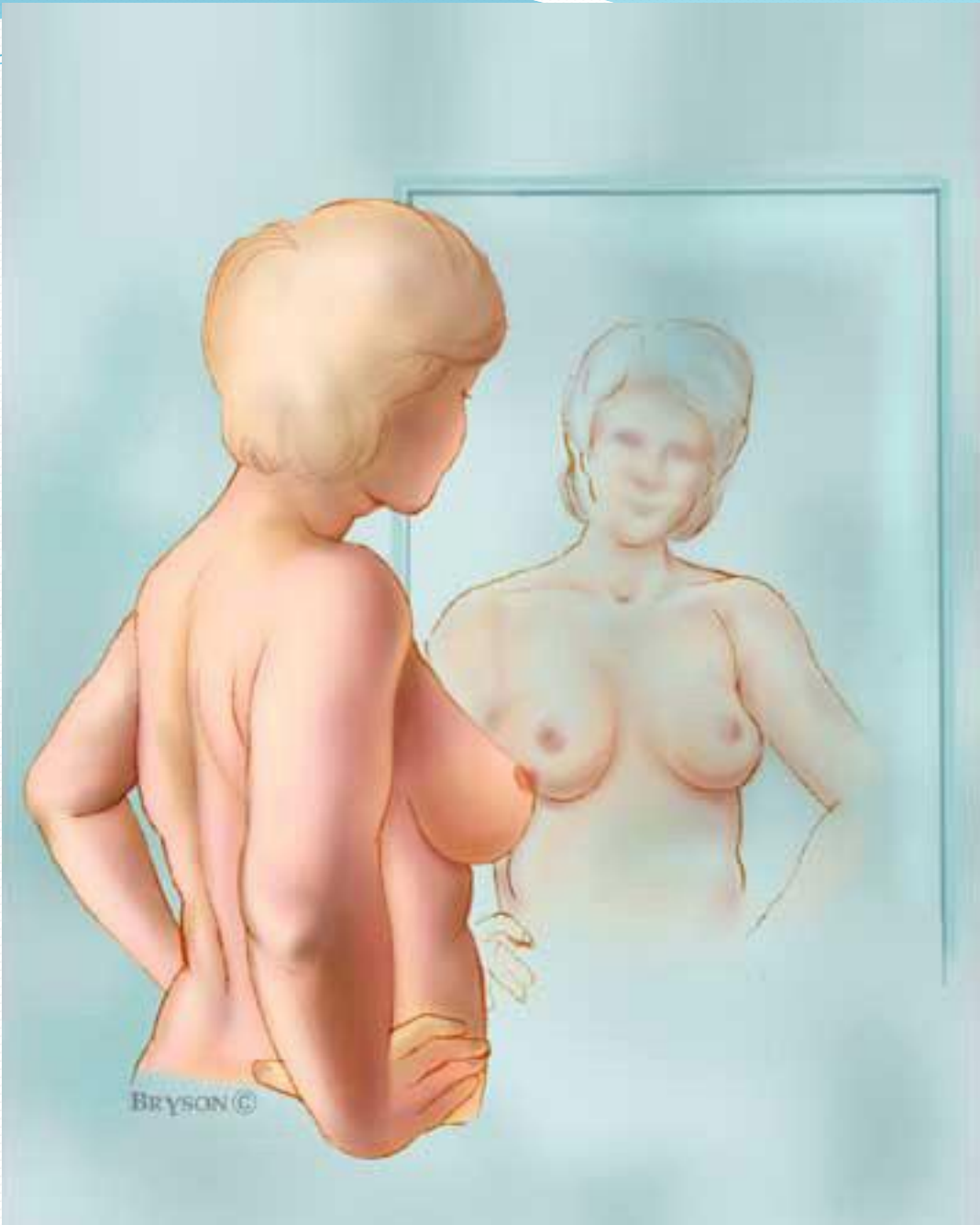
- Breast cancer is common as women age
- Catching breast cancer early means it can be cured.
- Most women are not aware of the best way to check their breasts
- They have a quick prod in the shower when they remember, often when one breast is tender and lumpy
- They then find something that feels like a lump
- This often causes panic because they haven't checked for months!
- The instant fright makes the lumpiness worse due to hormone changes

# When to examine your breasts

- Once a month for women of all ages
- If you are still having periods check your breasts 1 week after the start – day 8 of your cycle. *“Make a date with day 8”*
- If you are not having periods then pick a time when your breasts are not tender and swollen and record the date on the app and it will remind you next month, this could be the 8<sup>th</sup> of the month and you can still *“Make a date with day 8”*

# How to examine your breasts

- Begin by looking at your breasts in the mirror with your shoulders straight and your arms on your hips.
- Then press down on your hips - look at the skin and shape while pressing down on your hips is there any change after pressing down?



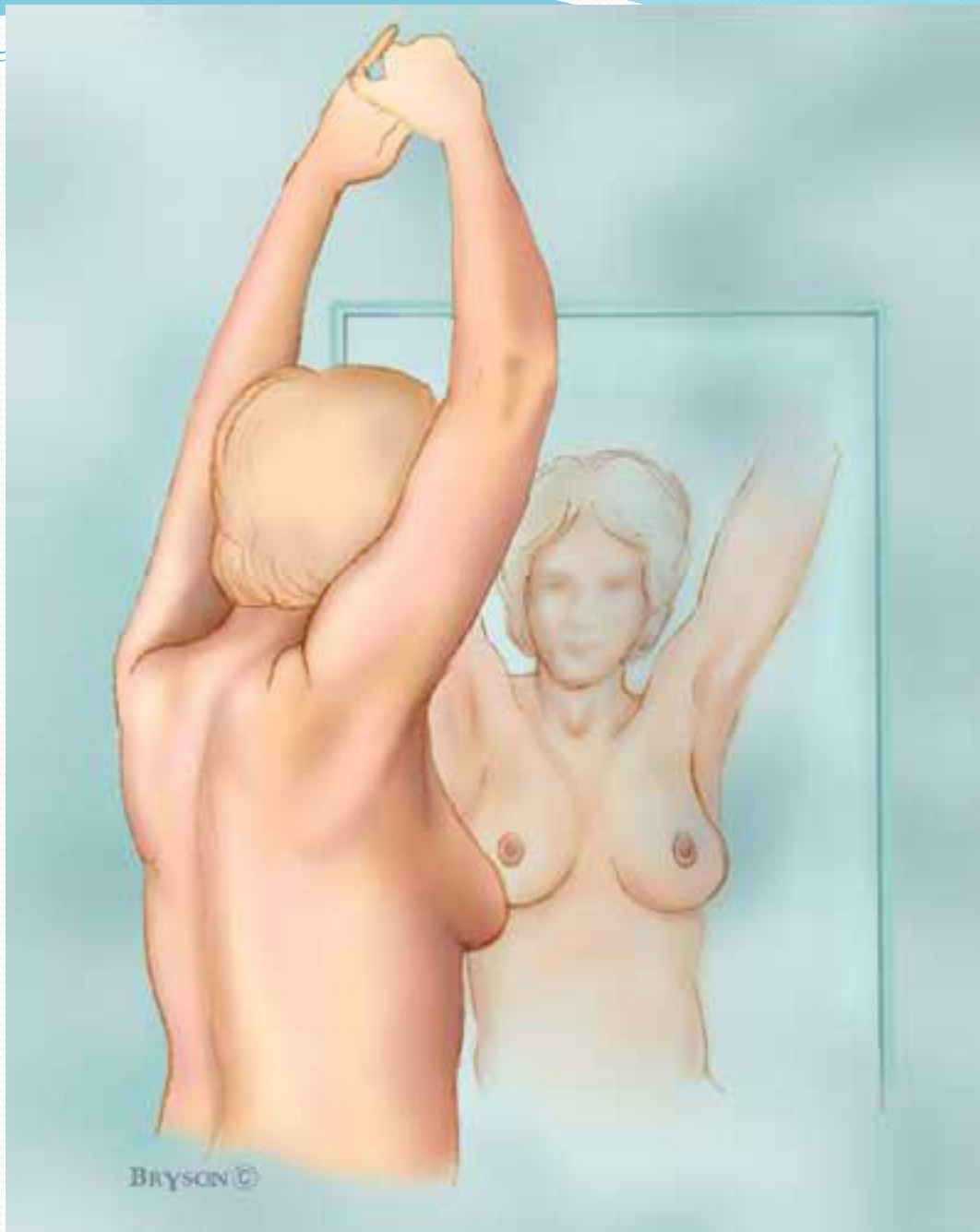
# What to look for:

- Breasts that are their usual size, shape, and colour
- Breasts that are evenly shaped without visible distortion or swelling
- **If you see any of the following changes, bring them to your doctor's attention:**
- Dimpling, puckering, or bulging of the skin
- A nipple that has changed position or an inverted nipple (pushed inward instead of sticking out)
- Redness, soreness, rash, or swelling

# What to look for:

- Now, raise your arms and look for the same changes. While you're at the mirror, look for any signs of fluid coming out of one or both nipples (this could be a watery, milky, or yellow fluid or blood).





# How to feel your breasts

- Next, feel your breasts while lying down, using your right hand to feel your left breast and then your left hand to feel your right breast. Use a firm, smooth touch with the first few finger pads of your hand, keeping the fingers flat and together.



# How to feel your breasts

- Follow a pattern to be sure that you cover the whole breast. You can begin at the nipple, moving in larger and larger circles until you reach the outer edge of the breast. You can also move your fingers up and down vertically, in rows, as if you were mowing a lawn. This up-and-down approach seems to work best for most women.



# How to feel your breasts

- Cover the entire breast from top to bottom, side to side — from your collarbone to the top of your abdomen, and from your armpit to your cleavage.
- If you feel a lump with the flat fingers which does not go away with pressure then see your GP about this.



# So why is it important to press the squashy breast?

- If you push the finger tips in, instead of pressing with the 'flat of your hand' you will feel lumps that are just the normal milk glands doing what they were designed to do-make milk!
- Normal breast tissue is soft and squashy, an abnormal lump will feel firm or hard – like a peanut.
- Remember – *“If you can press the squashy breast away its okay – if you can't and it feels hard get it checked straight away”*





# Why do breasts become painful and lumpy?

Normal breasts can be painful and lumpy and this is not a sign of cancer.

Women's breasts produce milk all the time from when periods start until they stop at the menopause. Apart from during breastfeeding the milk cannot escape from the breast and this can cause lumpiness and pain.

Stress and anxiety causes women to produce hormones which can make the pain and lumpiness worse. Your GP can assess you and explain this if the pain and lumpiness does not go away.

# If you get to know your breasts

- The regular monthly check will mean you will know your breasts and will not need to be scared of them
- If you are worried go immediately to your doctor
- If you are unlucky and have breast cancer it will be picked up at the earliest stage and your chances of being cured much much higher
- Your breasts will be a happy part of you and not a source of anxiety and possible grief

# 5 steps to check your breasts video

Look at your breasts in the mirror with your shoulders straight and

