

# Breast Self-Examination: Empowering Women's Breast Health

Urmijyoti Deori<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Venice Mairya David<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Professor, Rahman Institute of Nursing and Paramedical Sciences, Guwahati, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Faculty of Nursing Sciences, Mansarovar Global University, M.P., India

Corresponding Author: Urmijyoti Deori

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## ABSTRACT

Breast Self-Examination (BSE) is the most cost-effective technique for screening breast cancer. It can be easily performed by women to examine any abnormalities or unusual changes in their breast. Breast self-Examination is helpful in monitoring breast health, but it cannot be taken as a substitute for mammography as mammography is considered as a gold standard screening for breast cancer. Breast self-examination should be performed as a complementary practice alongside mammography, which means that it can be done in addition to mammography. The optimal timing for performing BSE for women who menstruate at regular interval is 3- 7 days after the menstrual period. Women who have irregular menstruation and women who have menopausal should choose any one day in a month to perform breast self-examination. Breast self- examination is a step wise procedure which should be performed regularly every month. It includes visual inspection as well as physical examination of breasts. Women should maintain a diary by noting the findings of their BSE. Any abnormal or unusual changes in the shape and size of the breast, lump or thickening of breast tissues, dimpling or puckering of breast skin, inverted nipple, unusual nipple discharges should be consulted with health care professionals. There are many studies that shows that most of the women do not

practice BSE because they are not aware of the techniques of BSE.

**Keywords:** Breast self- examination, BSE, Practice, Breast health.

## INTRODUCTION

Breast Self-Examination (BSE) is a simple technique of examining the breast by women to examine any abnormalities or unusual changes in their breast. It is the most cost effective and effective way to detect breast abnormalities which may be signs of breast cancer. The abnormalities in the breast that are found during breast self- examination may be discussed and consulted with health care providers so that early diagnosis of breast can be done and initiate treatment at the earliest. Regular Breast self-examination is very helpful for women to become familiar with what is normal for their breast tissue and texture making it easier to notice any unusual changes in their breast.<sup>[1]</sup>

Though breast self-Examination is helpful in monitoring breast health, it cannot be a substitute for mammography which is considered as a gold standard screening for breast cancer. Instead, breast self-examination compliments mammography, which means that it can be performed alongside mammography so that it can provide a better approach for early detection of breast cancer. This is because mammography is performed periodically whereas breast self-examination is

performed regularly every month. It is recommended to maintain a journal of the findings of breast self-examination to keep monthly records of all the findings.<sup>[2]</sup>

### **THE OPTIMAL TIME TO PERFORM BREAST SELF-EXAMINATION**

The optimal timing for performing breast self-examination depends on whether a woman menstruate or not. For women who menstruate at regular interval, the optimal timing for performing breast self-examination is 3-7 days after the menstrual period. The reason is that the breast become swollen and tender due to the hormonal effect during the menstrual period and after 3-7 days menstrual period, the hormones start to stabilize, and breast regain its normal texture that makes easier to observe for any unusual changes during breast self-examination.

Women who have irregular menstrual period and who have reached menopause should choose any one day in a month to perform breast self-examination. The day should be chosen, which is consistent and easy to remember, like every first day or every last day of the month.<sup>[3]</sup>

### **STEPS OF PERFORMING BREAST SELF-EXAMINATION**

Breast self-examination is a step wise procedure which should be performed regularly every month. It includes visual inspection as well as physical examination of breast by using hands.

There are several steps in BSE which are discussed in the following.

#### **Step 1: Choose the optimal time and place**

The first step of performing breast self-examination is to select the optimal time. It is also important to select a room with the facility of a large mirror and good lighting where a woman can perform BSE comfortably.

#### **Step 2: Visual inspection of breast**

Once the time and place are selected, breasts should be visually inspected in front of a

large mirror to notice any unusual changes in the breast. The visual inspection should be performed by placing arms in different positions.

1. Standing straight in front of mirror with arms placing at the sides – Woman must inspect and observe for any changes in her breast size, shape, or skin texture, which is not normal for her
2. Raising both arms above the head – In this position, it should be checked whether both breasts move evenly or not. Also, it should be noted for the presence of any swelling, dimpling or puckering of breast skin.
3. Placing hands on the hips – This position helps to observe for any unusual changes in breast contour.
4. Inspect the nipples – Along with the breast tissues, nipple should be also observed for presence of abnormalities like inversion of nipple (pulling nipple inward), redness, scaling, some abnormal discharge-like blood, or any other abnormalities.

#### **Step 3: Physical examination of the breast while standing or sitting**

After the visual inspection of the breast, the next step is to physically examine the breast by using the hands and fingers to palpate and feel for any lump in the breast. To palpate and feel the breast, the pads of three middle fingers should be used. While palpating the breast, it must cover all the areas of breast including the axilla (armpit) region where lymph nodes are located. To ensure the coverage of the whole areas of breast, the fingers should be moved in a circular pattern starting from the nipple to outward areas of the breast. Alternatively, it can be done by moving fingers up and down the breast, covering the whole area.

#### **Step 4: Physical examination of breast while lying down**

Breast also should be palpated while lying down. By lying down, it allows the breast tissue to spread evenly over the chest wall so that it is easier to feel for a lump if it is deeply

situated in the breast. The steps of performing BSE while lying down are as follows:

1. Lying flat on back with a pillow under one shoulder over which breast is to be palpated.
2. Place one hand behind the head so that the breast spreads and flattens evenly.
3. Use the other hand to palpate the breast using the same method of palpation.
4. Repeat the same steps of procedure for the other breast switching the hand.

#### **Step 5: Squeezing nipple to check for discharge**

The nipples should be gently squeezed to check for any abnormal discharge, like bloody, or whitish or yellowing secretions.

#### **Step 6: Recording of the findings**

A journal or diary should be maintained of the findings of all the breast self-examinations that are done every month.

#### **Step 7: Seeking medical advice for abnormal findings**

Any doubtful or unusual findings should be consulted with medical experts. Though not all lumps in breast are cancer, it is always wiser to be examined by medical professionals for precautionary measure.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### **DURATION OF TIME TAKEN IN BSE**

Breast self-examination takes only a few minutes to complete. It can be easily included in a woman's daily routine like when getting dressed up for the day or while undressing at nighttime. It can be also performed lying in bed at bedtime or while awakened in the morning after sleep. It is also convenient to perform BSE while taking a shower. The use of water and soap while taking a bath helps the fingers to glide easily over the breast for palpation.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### **FALSE PERCEPTION OF BSE**

Breast self-examination is an effective tool of getting familiar with what is normal look and feel of breast of a woman so that any unusual changes in the breast can be easily

noticed. Sometimes women may believe that it is not necessary to go for breast cancer screening by Mammography as they are regularly performing breast self-examination at home. BSE is not a substitute for Mammography.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### **ANXIETY RELATED TO BREAST SELF-EXAMINATION**

Anxiety related to breast self-examination is very common among women. Anxiety may be due to various factors like fear of finding any lump in the breast, uncertainty about how to perform the breast self-examination, fear of getting diagnosis of cancer. Exposed to misinformation related to breast self-examination and its findings may increase stress and anxiety. Any family history of breast cancer may heighten the anxiety for getting detected breast cancer signs while doing breast self-examination.<sup>[7]</sup>

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted to assess the psychological problems related to breast self-examination among rural women. The study was conducted among 379 women who were of 30 years of age and above. The result of the study showed that 146 (38.5%) of the women were confident on their knowledge on breast self-examination, 107 (8.2%) of the women experienced anxiety and 21 (5.5%) of the women experienced depression while performing BSE. There was a significant difference in the mean of anxiety level as well as mean of depression level among women who have detected abnormal findings during BSE.<sup>[8]</sup>

A study was conducted to assess the awareness and practice of breast self-examination among women. A cross-sectional survey was done among 300 women in Rajasthan. According to the study results, only 54 (18%) of the women have heard of BSE. Out of those 54 women, only 27 (50%) are aware that BSE is performed by self. 3 (5.56%) thought that it is done by doctors and 24 (44.44%) did not know who should perform BSE. The study concluded that 94.69% of the women were not practicing BSE was because they were not

aware of the steps of BSE. Whereas 2.83% of women were not practicing because they find it unnecessary, 1.77% of the women find it embarrassing and 0.71% of the women do not practice BSE because they were afraid of getting cancer detected.<sup>[9]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Breast self-examination is crucial for maintaining women's breast health and it can be easily performed by women. With the help of BSE, women become familiar with what is normal for their breast which make it easier to detect any unusual changes in her breast. It is not that all the unusual findings are the signs of breast cancer, but if those unusual signs are consulted and examined by health care professionals then women can be assured of her breast health. Awareness on Breast self-examination among women is very important as it is found in many studies that most of the women do not practice BSE as they are not aware of it.

## Declaration by Authors

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