



**10 THINGS
YOU CAN DO...**
if someone you know
has breast cancer.
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Spot that lump!

Breast cancer is one of the most talked about cancers amongst women. Here is what every woman should know about the disease. By **Vasenta Selvanayagam**

Early last year, Rubiyah Omar*, 33, found out she had a five-centimetre lump in her breast after persuading her doctors to send her for an ultrasound. "My breasts used to hurt so much, especially when I was about to get my menses. The GP referred me to a specialist, and they kept telling me it was a hormonal problem. When the pain kept coming back, I demanded an ultrasound be done. As my maternal family members are free from cancer and only my paternal side suffered from it, doctors told me I had nothing to worry about until the biopsy revealed otherwise," explains Rubiyah.

According to an article published in *The Star* newspaper in October 2004, 50 per cent of women diagnosed with breast cancer in Malaysia were under the age of 50. While breast self-examinations (BSEs) are usually encouraged by hospitals and in advertisements, you'll only be able to find out if it's cancer if you're observant and know your body well enough to feel any changes. When in doubt, refer back to your doctor. Before jumping to the conclusion that you're suffering from breast cancer, here are important facts you need to know about your breasts.

Lumpy vs lumps

Breasts are made up of different tissues, fat and milk glands, and are prone to become lumpy when hormone levels change or when there is extra fluid. The lumpiness is usually symmetrical and subsides after menstruation. But if you spot a lump only on one side, consult your doctor immediately. "The presence of fibro-glandular tissues in the breast is normal but when the ratio of these tissues to fat is more, it causes your breast to become denser and more prone to cancer," says Dr Suhaila Md Jonid, Consulting Radiologist at Columbia Asia Hospital.

Not all are cancerous

Take a deep breath: not all lumps are cancerous. "There are various lumps. It can be a benign lump that's cancer-free such as fibroadenomas and cysts, and malignant ones that are cancerous and require immediate medical treatment," says Dr Suhaila. Fibroadenomas and cysts may cause discomfort but can be removed using non-surgical methods depending on how serious the condition is.

"BSEs are recommended so that you'll get to know and understand the changes of your breasts better. But it doesn't help to detect early stages of cancer." – Dr Suhaila

Look out for other signs

Lumps are not the only thing you should be looking out for as more often than not, lumps only appear at the later stages. "The presence of hard, non-mobile mass, changes in skin texture and colour, skin puckering, *peau d'orange* (thickened skin with large pores), retracted nipples or a bloody discharge from the nipples are also warning signs. Women should also check their armpits regularly as enlarged lymph nodes there are also a sign," adds Dr Suhaila.



Thanks to breast feeding, Siow Fei Foong*, 44, realised something was wrong with her breasts four years ago

"I used to feel very uncomfortable every time my baby lay on my chest, and when I went for a mammography and an ultrasound, they found more than one lump. Mine was bilateral, whereby both breasts were infected. I made the choice to remove my left breast that couldn't be saved and keep the other one. No one in my family has breast cancer. I used to work as a part-time television news presenter at TV2 but I took four months off from my job to undergo treatments. Two months after surgery, I had to start chemo and knew I had to change my lifestyle. My chemo was a three-week cycle, so I planned my time and activities accordingly.

The first two weeks after chemo, I felt tired and weak, so I rested, but in the third week I felt fine, so I went back to work, did my banking and what I enjoyed doing. The six cycles of chemo took four months and I went on with radiotherapy that took another month, followed by hormonal therapy. My advice? If you know you have breast cancer, follow the doctor's instructions and make the best out of everything by working around your medical schedule. Be positive by counting your blessings (in disguise)." ⓘ



Common misconceptions

We've all heard it. But the truth is, these won't cause breast cancer:

- Wearing an underwired bra
- Using deodorants
- A bigger bust
- Caffeine
- Birth-control pills.

* After Rubiyah and Fei Foong discovered they had breast cancer, they turned to the Breast Cancer Welfare Association Malaysia, a voluntary organisation that provides support for patients. Log on to breastcancer.org.my to find out more!