

Screening for Breast Health

Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer among females in Hong Kong, fortunately survival rates are very high if detected early. The risk of breast cancer is higher with increased age, though it is possible for breast cancer to occur in younger age groups.

Although the breast self-examination is no longer recommended as a screening tool for breast cancer. Women are encouraged to remain “breast aware”, that is, to be familiar with the normal look and feel of their breasts.



If women notice any change in the appearance or feel of the breasts, seek medical attention promptly for further investigation.



Breast cancer

Breast cancer develops when normal cells in the breast change and grow out of control. It can happen in BOTH women and men, yet the rate in women is higher. Early breast cancer usually does not cause pain or show any symptoms at all. As cancer grows, however, it can cause the following changes:

- A lump or thickening in or near the breast or under the armpit
- A change in the size or shape of the breast
- A change in the way the breast or nipple looks or feels
- Ridges or pitting of the breast - the skin resembles the surface of an orange
- Nipple discharge or nipple tenderness; the nipple may also be inverted, or pulled back into the breast

Cancer can invade the breast tissue and spread to the underarm lymph nodes and other sites of the body, such as the lungs and bones. However, the survival rate of breast cancer is very high if it is detected at an early stage.

Breast cancer screening

It is believed that family history plays an important role in breast cancer. However, only five to six percent of all breast cancer cases are believed to be genetically related. Two genes, BRCA1 and BRCA2, are involved in the development of breast cancer and women can have a blood test to check for the presence of these genes if there is a family history of breast cancer.

Whilst regular screening for breast cancer will not prevent the disease, studies have shown that it will increase the chance of early detection, at a stage when it is easier to treat.

Self-examination

According to the recommendation by Cancer Expert Working Group on Cancer Prevention and Screening (CEWG) in 2021, breast self-examination is not a screening tool for breast cancer but if women notice any change in the appearance or feel of the breasts, please seek medical attention.

Breast ultrasound

CEWG also suggests that a breast ultrasound is not useful as a screening tool. However, it may help to assess an abnormality seen on screening mammography and to clarify features of a potential lesion. It may also be considered in patients with a very dense breast that may affect the sensitivity of mammogram assessment.

Mammograms

Women at high risk with the BRCA 1 or BRCA 2 gene or a strong family history of breast and ovarian cancer are advised to have an annual mammogram. Other women in the general population above 44 years old are recommended to have a mammogram every two years if they have the following risk factors:

- A history of breast cancer among first-degree relative
- Prior diagnosis of benign breast disease
- No previous pregnancy
- Late age of first live birth
- Early age of first menstrual period
- High Body Mass Index (BMI)
- Physical inactivity



The following tests can also be done to investigate breast cancer if necessary.

Breast MRI

The use of breast MRI to screen for breast cancer is controversial. Breast MRI uses magnetic resonance to create a fine image of the breast. It does not have radiation. It is not necessary for most women to use MRI as a cancer screening tool because when compared with a mammogram, it is less effective in detecting certain breast problems. It may produce a false positive result of breast cancer. However, studies have shown that in women of young age and high cancer risk (e.g. with BRCA1 or BRCA2), breast MRI is a more sensitive screening test to detect breast cancer than a mammogram.

Having mammogram

A mammogram is a fairly routine procedure though some women may find it uncomfortable. Before the procedure, a short questionnaire will be completed to determine the medical history. A gown will be provided, the bra and any accessories around the neck should be removed.

During the procedure, a female radiographer will position the patient's breasts on the plates. This can make some women feel uncomfortable, but the radiographer is trained to do this and works quickly. The x-ray plates will compress the breast tissue. This can be painful, but will last no more than 30 seconds.

Each breast is x-rayed at least twice, once from the top down and the other from side to side so that the radiographer can get a good look at the tissue.

When booking a mammogram consider:

1. It is best to have the mammogram right after the period, as the breast will be least tender or swollen. If menstruation is about to start or has started, try to reschedule the appointment.
2. Do not wear deodorant or talcum powder.
3. This test is not suitable for pregnant women.
4. If oral contraceptives are used, schedule the test on the day a new pill pack starts.

What if the result is abnormal?

Do not panic if the result of the mammogram is abnormal. Nine out of 10 women with an abnormal mammogram turn out NOT to have breast cancer. Depending on the doctor's assessment, more diagnostic tests might be needed in order to investigate the abnormality. An example would be a breast biopsy where a small amount of tissue from the breast is taken out and sent to a laboratory to test for the presence of cancer cells.

If the doctor thinks that the abnormal result is probably not due to cancer, another mammogram in six months might be suggested.

What about the risks?

Screening is recommended for early detection of breast cancer, which will enable treatment to take place when it is easier to control the disease. However, ladies should also understand the risks involved.

A mammogram involves using radiation, however, the dose of radiation is very low. The evidence clearly suggests that the life-saving benefits of early cancer detection far outweigh the risk of low-level radiation exposure.

Screening for breast cancer may produce false-positive results that require further testing. There is also a possibility for over-diagnosis, which means that patients receive treatment for cancer that, if undiscovered, would not have caused any harm.

Always seek the advice and guidance of attending physicians to discuss options that are relevant to the individual's unique circumstances, such as age, family history, and other considerations.

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References:
Centre for Health Protection, Hong Kong

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及早檢驗 預防乳癌

乳癌是香港女性中最常見的癌症。然而，若能及早檢測，存活率十分高。儘管患乳癌的風險會隨著年齡而增長，年輕的女性也會患上乳腺癌。

儘使最新的指引不再建議女士作乳房自我檢查，我們仍鼓勵女士留意乳房的外觀和觸感。



若女士留意到乳房的外觀和觸感有所改變，建議儘早求醫，作進一步檢查。



乳癌

乳癌是指乳房的正常細胞出現病變並且不受控制地生長。雖然男女都可以患上乳癌，但女士罹患的比率較高。早期的乳癌通常沒有徵狀，而患者亦不會感到任何痛楚，但隨著癌細胞逐漸生長，乳房或會出現以下變化：

- 乳房周圍或腋下出現硬塊
- 乳房大小或形狀改變
- 乳頭表面或形狀出現變化，觸感亦有改變
- 乳房出現坑紋或脊狀，或呈橙皮紋
- 乳頭變硬或流出分泌物；或出現凹陷情況

癌細胞可以入侵乳房組織及擴散至腋下的淋巴腺，甚至會擴散到肺部和骨骼等。不過，如乳癌能及早發現，病人的存活率卻很高。

乳房健康檢查

不少人相信患上乳癌的成因與家族病史有關。然而，只有5至6%的病例相信是由基因所致。兩種引發癌症基因分別為BRCA1和BRCA2。存有乳癌家族史的女士可透過驗血檢測體內是否存有這兩種基因。

定期的乳癌檢查雖不能完全預防乳癌出現，惟研究顯示，及早診斷能有助治療。

自我檢查

根據癌症預防及普查專家工作小組於2021年的建議，自我檢查非篩查乳癌的方法，但若女士留意到乳房的外觀和觸感有所改變，建議儘早求醫，作進一步檢查。

乳房超聲波測試

專家工作小組亦認為乳房超聲波並非有效的篩查方法。然而如果透過乳房X光造影檢查發現異常情況，乳房超聲波則可以幫助評估這些異常及潛在病變的情況。另外，乳房組織密度較高會影響乳房X光造影檢查的靈敏度，故此乳房組織密度較高的女士亦可考慮作乳房超聲波檢查。

乳房X光造影檢查

體內存有BRCA1和BRCA2基因、或有乳癌或卵巢癌家族史的女士，建議每年作乳房X光造影檢查。其他女士若44歲以上及有以下風險因素，則建議每2年接受乳房X光造影檢查：

- 直系親屬有乳癌家族史
- 曾患有良性乳腺疾病
- 從未懷孕
- 較高齡育有第一胎
- 第一次月經的年齡較早
- 體重指數 (BMI) 過高
- 缺乏運動或活動



如需要，病人可作以下進一步的檢測。

乳房磁力共振

利用磁力共振檢測乳癌仍存在爭議，惟磁力共振不含輻射，而是利用磁力共振原理來拍攝乳房照片。一般情況下，X光造影較磁力共振更有效地檢測相關的乳房病徵。另外，磁力共振的檢測結果有機會呈假陽性，故此磁力共振檢測未必具成效。然而，研究顯示磁力共振對於一些年輕而高風險的女士而言（如存有癌症基因 BRCA1 或 BRCA2），磁力共振檢測的敏感度則較高。

乳房 X 光造影檢查過程

乳房 X 光造影檢查過程十分簡單。部分女士檢測時或會感到不舒服，檢查進行前須填寫問卷以便醫護人員能更了解其病歷，並換上長袍、脫去胸圍和飾物。

女放射治療師會協助病人把乳房固定在適當位置，女士可能會感覺不自在，但放射治療師乃受過專業訓練並能迅速完成檢查程序。X光板會將乳房組織固定，屆時可能會感到一點痛楚，檢查只需約30秒。每邊乳房需最少照射兩次，一次由乳房的上至下，第二次在乳房的兩邊，以確保取得整個乳房的造影。

接受檢查前的準備：

- 1 最好在月經來潮後隨即接受檢查，因為乳房將不會腫脹或特別敏感。如月經開始或將會來潮，請另安排時間作檢查。
- 2 請勿在檢查前使用止汗劑或爽身粉。
- 3 懷孕期間不宜接受此檢查。
- 4 如正服用避孕藥，請於開始一包新藥當天接受檢查。

檢查結果異常怎麼辦？

如檢查結果異常，請勿擔心。九成得出異常結果的女士均非患上乳癌，須醫生作進一步的評估，病人或需要接受其他測試，如活組織切片化驗，以作診斷。活組織切片檢查會抽取一小部分的乳房組織送到化驗室作癌細胞測試。

如醫生認為所得出的異常結果並非由癌症所致，醫生或會建議病人於六個月後再作另一次乳房 X 光造影檢查。

檢查風險

乳房檢查能及早檢測乳癌，從而及早治療及控制病情。然而，女士們需清楚了解檢查的風險。

X光造影檢查具輻射性，但其輻射量很低，研究指出，及早發現癌病的益處遠遠超越輻射可能帶來的風險。

乳癌檢查或會得出假陽性結果，從而令病人需作更多測試。由於部分病變不會演變成為癌症，檢測得出的假陽性結果有時會帶來不必要的治療及焦慮。

乳房檢查需視乎年齡、家族病史或其他因素作考慮，因此建議病人向醫生查詢及商討。

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參考資料：

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