



Center for Young Women's Health
www.youngwomenshealth.org



Children's Hospital Boston

Breast Health

Women's breasts come in all shapes and sizes. There is no perfect shape or size for breasts. Normal breasts can be large or small, smooth or lumpy, and light or dark.

Most young women have a lot of questions about their breasts. This guide was created to answer some of the most common questions girls have about breast health.

How do breasts develop?

The inside of your breasts is made up of fatty tissue and many milk-producing glands, called mammary glands. The dark area of your breast around your nipple is called the areola. As your body starts to develop, a small bump grows under the areola and nipple. This bump is called the breast bud. As the buds get larger and rounder, the breasts grow.

As your breasts develop, the areolae get bigger and darker. Areolae and nipples can range in color from light pink to purplish to light gray depending on your skin color.

When will I get breasts?

Your breasts start growing when you begin puberty. Puberty is the name for the time when your body goes through changes and you begin to go from being a child to an adult. During puberty the hormone levels in your body change, causing your breasts to develop and your menstrual periods to start. Heredity (*the way certain characteristics are passed down from generation to generation*) and nutrition determine when you are going to begin puberty and develop breasts. Most girls' breasts begin growing when they are about 10 or 11 years old, but some girls may start developing breasts earlier or later than this age.

How long will it take to get breasts?

It takes three to five years from the time your breasts start growing until they reach their full size. The age when you start to develop does not have an effect on the final size of your breasts. For example, if you develop earlier than most girls, this doesn't mean that you will have bigger breasts than most girls.

Is there anything I can do to increase the size of my breasts?

Heredity is the most important factor in determining breast shape and size. No creams, special exercises, or clothing will permanently change your breast size. Your breasts may change with weight loss or gain or after a pregnancy, but for the most part the size of your breasts stays the same once you have finished puberty. Also, breast size has no effect on whether a woman will be able to breastfeed her baby.

When and how will my breasts make milk?

Inside a woman's breasts are tiny pockets called alveoli. After a woman gives birth, her brain's hormones tell the alveoli to produce milk. When her baby sucks on her nipple, the sucking draws milk from the alveoli through the milk ducts and out small holes in the nipple. When the mother stops breast-feeding her baby, her alveoli slowly stop making milk.

Breast Development: What's Normal?

My breasts are uneven. Is this normal?

It is very common for your breasts to grow at different rates while they're developing. Usually, they will look about the same size by the time they are done growing. If the size difference bothers you, you can try foam or gel inserts that fit into your bra or bathing suit. These inserts are sold at specialty bra and lingerie shops.

Sometimes breasts can still be really uneven (*different by more than a cup size*) after they're done developing. If you are unhappy about the difference in your breasts' sizes and your breasts have finished growing (*3–5 years after your breasts started developing*), you may talk with your health care provider about the benefits and risks of cosmetic surgery.

My breasts are very large, and they make my back hurt because they're so heavy. It's also hard to exercise, because I get sore breasts. What can I do?

Many girls have breasts that they feel are too large. Often, they're not worried about how they look, but they're bothered by breast pain, back pain, shoulder pain, dents in the shoulders from bra straps, rashes, skin problems under the breasts, or difficulties with exercising. Girls can also feel badly or self-conscious if they are teased about their large breasts.

If your breasts are very large, there are some options that can help.

- First, find a well-fitting bra to minimize and support your breasts. Look for a bra that has wide shoulder straps and supportive cups. If you need help with measuring for a bra, see a trained salesperson working at a department store or a lingerie store for help.
- If you are overweight, working to reach a healthy weight may also help.
- The last option is to have a breast reduction surgery. This type of surgery, which is done by a plastic surgeon, removes some of the extra breast tissue to decrease pain. It is a big surgery, and you should talk about it with your health care provider.

Is it normal to have hair around my nipples?

Some girls have hair around their nipples. This is completely normal. If the hair bothers you, it's best to cut it with small scissors. Plucking or shaving the hair can cause infection.

My nipples point inward instead of out. Is this normal?

If your nipples point inward instead of out, you have "inverted nipples." Between 10%–20% of all girls have inverted nipples. This is normal and will not affect your health in any way. If you have inverted nipples, it's important to keep them clean to avoid getting an infection in the folds of skin around your nipple.

If your nipples used to point out but have suddenly turned in, you should contact your health care provider for an examination.

What are stretch marks? Are they normal?

Stretch marks are red spoke-like lines that appear on the skin during periods of rapid physical growth (such as puberty or pregnancy). During puberty, stretch marks on the breasts are very common and completely normal. Other common places for stretch marks are on the hips and thighs. Over time, the stretch marks will fade to match your normal skin color (usually within 1 to 2 years).

If I have a rash around the nipple area on my breasts, does that mean that my breasts are infected?

Usually, yes. A rash can be a sign of an infection, especially if one breast is swollen and tender, if there's a discharge, or if you have a fever. You can also get a rash on the skin under your breasts, which is usually either a heat rash or a yeast infection. If any of these signs of infection are present, call your health care provider. Sometimes a hair root around your nipple area can become infected. When this happens, one or more tiny red bumps appear. The tiny red bumps are called folliculitis. If you have this concern, talk to your health care provider.

Is breast pain or tenderness normal?

You may feel a tingling or aching in your chest when your breast buds start developing. After you start to get your periods you may notice that your breasts become tender or sore about a week before you get your period each month. This soreness does not happen to everyone. If you are having pain, check with your health care provider who may suggest taking medication (such as ibuprofen) to help with the symptoms.

What if I have a discharge coming from my breasts?

A discharge from your breast(s) could mean that your breast(s) are infected, that a breast duct is dilated (widened), or that you have a hormone imbalance. The discharge may be on just one side or from both breasts. When a milky discharge comes from a young woman's breast when she is not breast feeding, it's called galactorrhea. This condition can result from taking certain medications such as birth control pills or anti-depressants, from being pregnant or recently being pregnant, from low thyroid hormone levels, or rarely from a small benign (not cancerous) pituitary tumor. Your body may be making extra amounts of prolactin, which can cause this white discharge from your nipples. A brown or bloody discharge may come from dilated breast ducts or small polyps in the breast ducts.

A small amount of yellow discharge sometimes occurs around the time a girl starts her period. You should see your health care provider if you have any kind of breast discharge.

Breast Lumps & Bumps

Is it normal to have lumpy breasts?

Normal breasts can be smooth or lumpy. Most lumps are due to normal changes in breast tissue that occur during development. Your breasts may also feel different or lumpy around the time of your period. If you do notice that a new lump appears in your breast and does not disappear after your period, you should contact your health care provider.

What if I notice a new lump or something different about my breasts?

Most lumps or changes in your breasts that occur when you are a teen or young woman are due to normal changes in the breast tissue. If you find a lump it could be from hormonal changes, an injury, a breast cyst filled with fluid from a blocked mammary gland (*milk-producing gland*), an infection, or a benign (not cancerous) tumor called a fibroadenoma. If the lump is sore or the skin over it is red, you may have an infection and you should contact your health care provider. If your breast just feels lumpy, check it again three to four days after your next period, since your breasts may feel different or lumpy to the touch around the time of your period. If the lump does not disappear after you finish your period, see your health care provider. Your health care provider may order an ultrasound of your breast to figure out what kind of lump you have. If you have a fibroadenoma, your doctor will discuss whether it can just be regularly examined and watched without any special treatment, or if you need surgery to remove it.

What if I notice a hard lump and redness on my breast?

A hard lump in the breast with redness over it could mean you have a breast abscess (*a deep infection*), especially if you also have breast pain and a fever. Although a breast abscess is usually a complication of breastfeeding, other things can cause breast infections, such as shaving, tweezing, or plucking hairs around the nipple area; sexual play that causes trauma; or getting a cut on the breast. Abscesses can also occur if a duct becomes blocked during breast development, or from bacteria getting into the nipple.

It's best to try to prevent a breast infection by avoiding things that could cause trauma or cuts to your breast(s). If you are breastfeeding, keep your nipples clean and dry.

If you think you or a friend might have a breast abscess, don't wait! Make an appointment to see your health care provider and start antibiotics right away.

What if I have a bump on my breast(s) from a sports injury or fall?

Treat your breast injury as you would treat an injury on any other part of your body. If the lump is sore and black & blue, it is probably from the injury. If you feel a lump but you don't remember injuring yourself, or if the lump is still present after a week, see your health care provider. But don't worry – there is no link between breast injury and breast cancer.

Self Breast Exam

How do I take care of my breasts?

It's important to know how your breasts normally look and feel, so you'll be able to tell if there are changes later. You may start doing breast self-examinations once a month in your late teen years (*18 to 20 years old*). This will help you get to know how your breasts feel normally. You will then be able to notice if any new or different lumps develop. Remember, some lumps are normal, but if you are concerned, talk to your health care provider.

Talk with your health care provider about self-exams. Breast self-exams are best done at the same time every month, right after your menstrual period ends. Another great time to do an examination is the day after you have seen your health care provider for a check-up, and he or she has said that your breasts are healthy. Then you'll know that all the "lumps" you feel in your breasts are just normal glands. Here's how to do a 3-part breast self-exam that takes only a few minutes.

Lying down:

- First, place a pillow under your right shoulder.
- Next, put your right hand under your head.
- Check your entire right breast area with the pads of the fingers of your left hand.

- Use small circles to feel all around your breast, then feel up–and–down.
- Use light, medium, and firm pressure over each area of your breast.
- Gently squeeze the nipple to check for any discharge.
- Switch arms and repeat these steps on your left breast.

In front of a Mirror:

- Check for any changes in the shape or look of your breasts.
- Note any skin or nipple changes such as dimpling or nipple discharge.
- Look at your breasts in four steps: arms at sides, arms overhead, hands on hips pressing firmly to flex chest muscles, and bending forward.

In the Shower:

- With soapy hands and fingers flat, raise your right arm.
- Check your right breast.
- Use the same small circles and up and down pattern described above in the “Lying Down” position.
- Switch arms and repeat on your left breast.

Your health care provider will perform a breast exam once a year. While you may find this a little embarrassing, a breast exam is an important way for your health care provider to learn what is normal for your breasts and to find any lumps that aren't normal.

Breast Cancer Risks

Who is at risk for breast cancer?

Women with certain medical conditions, lifestyle habits, or traits (*referred to as “risk factors”*) may be more likely than other women to get cancer. However, having risk factors does not mean you will get breast cancer. Most women who develop breast cancer have no risk factors at all.

Overall, you are at a higher risk for developing breast cancer if you:

- Have close relatives (*mother, sister, grandmother, or aunt*) who have had breast cancer
- Are obese
- Drink alcohol excessively

How can I lower my risk for breast cancer?

You can lower your risk for breast cancer by keeping your lifestyle healthy. Don't smoke, limit alcohol intake, exercise regularly, follow a healthy diet, and have regular checkups with your health care provider.

Do I need to have a mammogram?

A mammogram is an x–ray of the breasts, usually done to try to find early signs of breast cancer. Teens do not need to get mammograms. In fact, mammograms don't work well in teenagers and young adults because the breast tissue is too thick and too dense to get a clear picture. Most women start having mammograms when they are about 40 years old. Some women younger than 40 years old have mammograms if they have a family history of breast cancer or if they have had radiation treatment for other cancers in the past.

Learning to care for your breasts when you're a teenager is an important way to make sure that your whole body stays healthy when you're older. Although breast cancer is very uncommon in women under the age of 35, if you become familiar with the normal look and feel of your breasts now, you're taking an important step toward good general health for the future.

Buying a Bra

What should I know before I buy a bra?

A bra supports your breasts. While some girls don't wear one, others like to wear them, especially when they play sports. All bras are shaped to fit around both your chest and your breasts.

Some bras are sized small, medium, or large. Bras sized this way, such as sports bras, fit snugly but comfortably. A well–fitting sports bra can prevent breast pain during sports or running.

More specifically fitted bras have both a breast cup size, which ranges from AA (*smallest*) to EE (*largest*), and a chest size—from about 30 inches to 40 inches (*this is the number of inches around your chest at the fullest part of your bust*).

You or a clerk at the store can measure you for the right size bra. You should try on many bras to find the most comfortable size and style. Finding a well–fitting bra is important to prevent breast discomfort, back pain, and shoulder pain.

Measuring for a Bra

Why do I need to measure for a bra and how do I do it?

If you're ready to buy your first bra or if your breast size has changed, you may be wondering what size bra to buy. Figuring out the correct size can be tricky unless you do your homework first. This guide will help you measure yourself correctly to determine the size you will need (*chest size and cup size*). This will be important when buying a bra as well as other clothing that uses bra or cup measurements, such as bathing suits. Of course, trying on bras is always necessary, since different brands and styles fit differently.

Figuring out your bra size:

If you are about to buy your first bra, it's best to go to a department store that has a special department that sells bras and underwear, usually called the "lingerie department". Ask to be fitted by a "lingerie specialist" (*a professional who has special training in fitting bras*). This service is free, and having the measurements done by a professional will make sure that your bra fits correctly. By doing this, you will find the bra that feels the best and also looks the best under your clothes.

If you decide you would feel more comfortable figuring out your bra size at home, the following information will guide you through the steps of measuring yourself.

Chest Size:

Place a cloth measuring tape under your breasts. Wrap the tape around your chest so the tape measure meets the beginning part of the tape. When you have the measurement number, add 5 inches.

For example:

Your measurement around your chest is:
 $27'' + 5'' = 32''$

This means that your Chest Size is 32.

If your measurement ends up to be an ODD number, you will need to go up to the next EVEN number to figure out your size.

For example:

Your measurement around your chest is:
 $28'' + 5'' = 33''$

This means that your Chest Size is 34.

Cup Size:

Next, you will measure around your chest at the largest or fullest part of your breasts, called your "bustline." You need to measure with your arms straight down, so ask someone you feel comfortable with to help you (*like your mom, sister, or friend*).

Your Bustline Measurement will be higher than your chest ("*under the breast*") measurement. Your Cup Size is the difference between your Chest Size and your Bustline Measurement. size.

For example:

- Your Bust Measurement at the fullest part of your bust is 34"
- Your Chest Size is 32" ($27'' + 5$)
- The difference is 2 inches, which means your Cup Size is a "B cup".

Guide to Figuring Out Bra Cup Size:

Cup	Size Difference
AA Cup	½ inch
A Cup	1 inch
B Cup	2 inch
C Cup	3 inch
D Cup	4 inch