



Amigos de la Gente de Edad

## Breast cancer screening

### About breast cancer

At some point in her life, one in twelve women in the U.K. develops breast cancer. The risk of getting breast cancer increases with age, so women aged 65 or over are more at risk than younger women. Half of all British women with breast cancer are over 65 years old.

Many women aged 65 or over believe they are not at risk of breast cancer. This is not true, and this Infosheet tells you more about what you can do and what you are entitled to.

There are two important things older women should do to help themselves:

- look and feel for changes in their breasts - being 'breast aware' - and telling their doctor straight away about any changes.
- have regular breast screening every three years if they are aged 50 or over.

### What is breast screening?

Breast screening is a way of detecting breast cancers, often at a very early stage. It involves a special kind of X-ray called a mammogram.

There is a Breast Screening Program in some parts of Spain run by the Asociación Española Contra Cancer (Spanish Association Against Cancer). Details of telephone contact numbers can be found on page 4 of this Infosheet, Your local Age Concern Organisation will be able to advise you should you need someone to translate for you.

***As breast cancer is more common in women over 65 it is very worthwhile to be screened every three years.***

### Why do I need to be screened?

Early cancers are much easier to treat and to respond to a wider range of treatment. It is better to find breast cancer before it has had a chance to spread to other parts of the body. Screening helps detect cancers when they are very small and often before they can be felt.

Mammography is a good way to detect cancers in older women. After the menopause breast tissue tends to become softer and less dense than that of younger women. This makes it easier to detect any changes using X-rays. If you are 65 or over, it is particularly important (we repeat) to go for breast screening.

### **If I am screened regularly do I still need to be ‘breast aware’?**

Yes, all women need to be breast aware. Breast screening detects cancers but cannot prevent them. It is possible for a cancer to develop in the time **between two X-ray appointments**. Continue to look for and feel for any changes, and if you notice change see your doctor, even if you have recently had a breast X-ray or are due to have one.

### **What happens when I go for screening?**

You will be seen by a radiographer who will explain what will happen.

- You will need to undress to the waist to have your X-ray so it is a good idea to wear a skirt or trousers and top.
- Do not use talcum powder before your visit as this may show up as white specks on your X-ray.

Your visit may take a while, but the actual screening only takes about five minutes. Some women find the X-ray machine, which has to press the breast tightly, uncomfortable or even briefly painful, but this is only for a few seconds. Feel free to ask questions. You will be told before you leave when and how you will get your results.

- Your local Age Concern can help with making an appointment. If you need assistance in standing or undressing, if you need wheelchair access or have a transport problem, you should advise us at the same time and discuss your needs.
- Your local Age Concern will also be able to advise you should you need someone to translate for you.

### **What happens if something is found?**

About ten per cent of women screened are asked to attend an ‘assessment clinic’. Sometimes this is necessary because the first X-rays are not clear and need to be done again, but do not worry unduly.

If something unusual is found on your X-ray you will be asked to have further checks. This does not necessarily mean that you have cancer. Screening detects changes in your breasts that may or may not be cancer. Most are harmless. Nine out of ten women who need further checks will not have cancer. Breast cancer is, of course, a possibility but it is always best to find out and have treatment sooner than later.

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## **What if I do have cancer?**

A diagnosis of breast cancer is not a death sentence. It is not always possible to cure breast cancer completely but it is often possible to keep it under control for a long time. Many women with breast cancer continue to live a normal life span following treatment. By finding your cancer as early as possible you will have given yourself the best chance of successful treatment.

You will be referred for specialist medical advice and will be able to talk over how the cancer will be treated.

When you attend later appointments it is a good idea to take someone with you, such as a friend, relative or carer. Not only can they give you moral support but they can also listen to what the doctor or surgeon says and discuss it with you afterwards.

If you do have an operation, you should ideally be seen by a specialist breast surgeon.

The treatment available in Spain is on a par with any other developed country.

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## **Checking your breasts**

Being 'breast aware' simply means knowing what is normal for you and telling your doctor straight away if you notice any changes. As you get older breast tissue does change, and every woman's breasts are different. It is important that you get to know how your breasts look and feel, so that you can spot any changes more quickly.

## **What am I looking for?**

All changes should always be reported to your doctor straight away. These include:

- alterations in the size and shape of either breast
- swelling, puckering or dimpling of the skin
- 'orange peel skin' - unusually large pores anywhere on the breast
- any weeping from the nipple, especially if blood stained
- veins standing out more than usual
- changes in the shape or direction of a nipple

## **Changes to feel for:**

- any new lumps in either breast or armpit
- enlarged glands under either armpit
- pain or discomfort, particularly if this persists or is in one area of the breast. But remember, it is a common misconception that all suspicious breast lumps are painful - many are not.

Be aware of slight changes - anything that is new for you. If you are worried about anything always see your doctor. The great majority of changes will be

harmless but the possibility of cancer always needs to be checked. You will not be wasting anyone's time.

### **Whom can I contact to find out more?**

If you want to talk to someone about breast cancer, contact your family doctor or one of the patient charities or self-help groups listed below.

#### **BACUP (British Association of Cancer United Patients)**

3 Bath Place, Rivington Place, London, EC2A 3JR, England.

[www.cancerbacup.org.uk](http://www.cancerbacup.org.uk)

[info@cancerbacup.org.uk](mailto:info@cancerbacup.org.uk)

Telephone: 00 44 207 696 9003

Provides information, counselling and emotional support to people with cancer, their families and friends. All services are confidential and free to people affected by cancer.

#### **Cancerlink:**

17 Britannia Street, London, WC1X 9JN, England.

Helpline - England: 00 44 207 833 2451

Offers free confidential support and information about cancer, by post, by telephone and through its publications.

#### **Breast Cancer Care:**

Kiln House, 210 New Kings Road, London, SW6 4NZ, England.

Helpline - England 00 44 207 384 2984

[info@breastcancercare.org.uk](mailto:info@breastcancercare.org.uk)

Offers information, emotional and practical support to women affected by breast cancer (or other related problems). This will include information for families, partners and friends.

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