

Breast cancer - recognition and referral: Summary

- Approximately 50,000 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed each year in the UK, around a quarter of these following screening mammography.
- A full time GP is likely to diagnosis 1–2 cases every year.
- Breast cancer is less common in males.
- The 5-year survival is 85%, although this figure includes cases detected by screening as well as those identified after symptoms have occurred.
- Breast lump is the most common presenting symptom.
- A malignant breast lump is usually painless, but pain can occur.
- Nipple symptoms, including change in shape or nipple bleeding, are recognized symptoms as are skin changes, such as tethering or peau d'orange.
- A diagnosis of breast cancer is generally made by mammography and core biopsy. This is performed in secondary care.
- Refer people using a suspected cancer pathway referral (for an appointment within 2 weeks) for breast cancer if they are:
 - Aged 30 years and over and have an unexplained breast lump with or without pain, or
 - Aged 50 years and over with any of the following symptoms in one nipple only:
 - Discharge.
 - Retraction.
 - Other changes of concern.
- Consider a suspected cancer pathway referral (for an appointment within 2 weeks) for breast cancer in people:
 - With skin changes that suggest breast cancer, or
 - Aged 30 years and over with an unexplained lump in the axilla.
- Consider non-urgent referral in people aged under 30 years with an unexplained breast lump with or without pain.

Table 2. Symptoms suggestive of breast cancer.

Symptom	Possible cancer	Referral recommendation
Axillary lump (unexplained), age 30 years and over	Breast cancer	Consider a suspected cancer pathway referral (for an appointment within 2 weeks)

Symptom	Possible cancer	Referral recommendation
Breast lump (unexplained) with or without pain, age 30 years and over	Breast cancer	Refer people using a suspected cancer pathway referral (for an appointment within 2 weeks)
Breast lump (unexplained) with or without pain, under age 30 years	Breast cancer	Consider non-urgent referral
Nipple changes of concern (in one nipple only) including discharge and retraction, age 50 years and over	Breast cancer	Refer people using a suspected cancer pathway referral (for an appointment within 2 weeks)
Skin changes that suggest breast cancer	Breast cancer	Consider a suspected cancer pathway referral (for an appointment within 2 weeks)
Deep vein thrombosis	Several, including urogenital, breast, colorectal, or lung	Carry out an assessment for additional symptoms, signs, or findings that may help to clarify which cancer is most likely Consider urgent investigation or a suspected cancer pathway referral (for an appointment within 2 weeks)

Symptoms of breast cancer in women

Main symptoms of breast cancer in women

Symptoms of breast cancer in women may include:

- a lump, or swelling in your breast, chest or armpit
- a change in the skin of your breast, such as dimpling (may look like orange peel) or redness (may be harder to see on black or brown skin)
- a change in size or shape of 1 or both breasts
- [nipple discharge](#) (if you are not pregnant or breastfeeding), which may have blood in it
- a change in the shape or look of your nipple, such as it turning inwards (inverted nipple) or a rash on it (may look like eczema)
- pain in your breast or armpit which does not go away – [breast pain](#) that comes and goes is usually not a symptom of breast cancer

Information:

It's important to [check your breasts](#) regularly so you know what's normal for you. This makes it easier to notice any changes in the size, look or feel of your breasts.

Symptoms of breast cancer in men

Main symptoms of breast cancer in men

Symptoms of breast cancer in men may include:

- a lump or swelling in your chest or armpit
- liquid leaking from your nipples ([nipple discharge](#)), which may have blood in it
- changes in the size or shape of either side of your chest
- sores or ulcers on your chest
- a change in the shape or look of your nipple, such as it turning inwards (inverted nipple) or a rash on it (may look like eczema)

Information:

It's important to check your chest regularly so you know what's normal for you. This makes it easier to notice any changes in the size, look or feel of your chest or nipples.

Symptoms of secondary breast cancer

If breast cancer spreads to other parts of the body it's called secondary breast cancer.

The symptoms depend on which part of the body the cancer has spread to. It can spread anywhere, but it most commonly affects the bones, liver, lungs or brain.

You may also have general symptoms including:

- feeling tired or having no energy
- loss of appetite or [losing weight without trying to](#)
- feeling unwell with no clear cause
- feeling or being sick
- difficulty sleeping

Causes of breast cancer in women

Who is more likely to get breast cancer

Anyone can get breast cancer and it's not always clear what causes it.

You might be more likely to get it if you:

- are over 50
- have dense breast tissue – you may be told this after a breast screening (mammogram)
- have other people in your family who've had breast or ovarian cancer – you may have inherited a faulty gene, such as a faulty BRCA gene

- have certain breast conditions, such as benign breast disease, ductal carcinoma in situ or lobular carcinoma in situ

You may also be more likely to get breast cancer if you have higher levels of the hormones oestrogen, progesterone or testosterone. This may be more likely if you:

- started your periods before you were 12, or went through the menopause after you turned 55
- have not given birth, or gave birth for the first time after 30
- did not breastfeed your children
- have used the contraceptive pill in the last 10 years, or take hormone replacement therapy (HRT) – these only slightly increase your risk and for many people the benefits of taking them outweigh the risks

Many breast cancers are also linked to lifestyle, such as smoking.

If you're trans or non-binary

If you're a trans man, trans woman or are non-binary, how likely you are to get breast cancer depends on if you've had surgery, and if you're taking hormones.

Genetic testing for breast cancer risk

If any of your close relatives have had breast or ovarian cancer, you may be eligible for an NHS genetic test.

A genetic test will check to see if you have a faulty gene which increases your risk of getting cancer, such as a faulty BRCA gene.

Speak to a GP about genetic testing if breast or ovarian cancer run in your family.

The GP may ask about:

- who and how many people in your family have had cancer
- the type of cancer they had
- how old they were when they were diagnosed
- if your family member is available for genetic testing or has been tested before

The GP will refer you to a specialist breast clinic or genetics clinic for assessment if they think you are at increased risk.

You can also have NHS genetic testing for faulty BRCA genes if you're 18 years or older and have 1 or more Jewish grandparent.

Treatments if you're at increased risk

If you have a higher risk of getting breast cancer because you have a faulty gene, there are some treatments that can help reduce your risk.

A doctor or genetic counsellor will discuss your options with you and explain the benefits and possible side effects.

Treatments to reduce your risk include:

- medicines
- surgery to remove your breasts ([mastectomy](#)) – this may be offered if you are at very high risk