



One More Myth: Breast Self Exam (BSE) Doesn't Work

Reality: BSE can be lifesaving!

Until recently, women were encouraged to do monthly BSE starting at age 21, and to report any change to their physician. Doing BSE seemed to be a logical thing to do since breast cancer is a progressive disease and detecting it when it is small should be associated with a better prognosis. We do have very good evidence that screening mammograms starting at age 40 do improve breast cancer survival, but as we discussed last month, some cancers are missed on the mammogram. Also, women under forty are not advised to have mammographic screening.

BSE has proven to be valuable in detecting small cancers that are either missed by the mammogram or show up between mammograms. Unfortunately, there are no well-designed scientific studies that prove that doing BSE on a regular basis will improve survival. Because of the lack of scientific data both the American Cancer Society and the Komen Foundation have recently stated they BSE is optional. They do however, recommend that women should be self-aware and report any changes to their physicians. This concept of advising women to be self-aware, but giving them the option to not do BSE sends a confusing message. In my experience, the only way a woman can become aware of important early changes in her breasts is to teach them to do proper self-examinations and to motivate them to do it every month.

One of the barriers to teaching women to do BSE with confidence is that it takes time, and most physicians do not have the time to teach it. In an effort to overcome this timing barrier, I have created a BSE video that explains step by step how to do BSE with confidence. A link to this video is provided at the end of this article.

The basic concepts are simple. Typically when a woman attempts breast self-exam she finds that her breasts are lumpy and this causes anxiety. The way to address this issue is to start doing BSE after a physician has done a thorough exam, and has determined the breasts are normal. Knowing that the breast is normal, women can focus on obtaining a mental image of the normal breast, the goal is to visualize not analyze.

I have seen many cases in which women who were confident in doing BSE detected changes that were so subtle that I would not have detected them on my exam. When a woman detects a change in her breast we do additional imaging including ultra-sound and focused mammographic views. When we do find cancers using this approach they are typically small and associated with an excellent prognosis.

Breast self-exam is an important layer of protection. It should be performed regularly by all women starting at age 21. It is the only layer of protection for women under 40 and it is an effective technique in detecting cancers missed on routine screening mammography. To learn more about how to do BSE with confidence, link to: beawarefoundation.org/breast-self-exam-video

If you have any questions on breast cancer or would like a myth debunked, feel free to contact us.