



# PINK OCTOBER

## BREAST CANCER AWARENESS

### October is international Breast Cancer Awareness Month and it is no different here in the Cook Islands.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has disrupted this year's annual mammography screening programme in Rarotonga, but ensuring our women have continued access to breast examination services is still top of mind for the Cook Islands Breast Cancer Foundation (CIBCF) and health ministry Te Marae Ora (TMO).

The annual mammograms are usually carried out by a team of specialists from New South Wales in Australia – led by breast physician Dr Fran Jones, they each take annual leave from their fulltime jobs to come to Rarotonga for the screenings.

Instead, with the assistance of TMO and the Cook Islands Family Welfare Association, CIBCF has held several breast self-examination (BSE) clinics over the past few months.

More than 60 women attended these sessions, which included testimonies from breast cancer survivors.

We would like to thank those women who made the time to come along to these clinics and we would like you to know that we are thinking of you all and you are not alone. We are here to make sure you are breast-aware and breast-healthy.

We are hopeful the mammography screening programme will return in 2021, but in the meantime please keep up your BSE and if you notice any changes, discharge or anything unusual in your breasts, get in touch with the lovely ladies at TMO for further assessment.

TMO is also looking at other options for providing breast screening for our women, including the possibility of bringing a team over from New Zealand as soon as travel restrictions ease.

Early detection and treatment of breast cancer greatly increases the chance of affected women living much longer to enjoy and be enjoyed by their families.

Mammograms are recommended every two years for all women aged 40 years and above, particularly those with a family history of

breast cancer, as well as the brave women who have had breast cancer before.

Last year more than 500 women were screened as part of the annual mammography programme. Of these, 31 women required follow-up ultrasound checks and a further 10 women required a biopsy of their breast tissue, with six referred to New Zealand.

***“In the absence of mammogram services in 2020, it is important women take time to undertake breast self-examination”***  
– Dr Aumea Herman

In 2018 the programme uncovered seven patients with suspected breast cancer, all of whom received treatment.

“In the absence of mammogram services in 2020, it is important women take time to undertake breast self-examinations,” says Secretary of Health Dr Aumea Herman.

“Women already know their bodies and how their breasts usually look and feel. Looking for unusual changes is important – these include a change in skin colour, change in shape, new nipple inversion, skin dimpling, nipple discharge or crusting, and lumps. The best time to check your breasts is usually in the week after your period.”

CIBCF would also like to advise that although we are not out fundraising this year due to the hardships caused by COVID-19, we do have our pink ribbons and donation boxes around town at selected CITC stores, Vodafone, Jetsave Travel, Stationery Supplies and Vonnias, so you can support our October awareness campaign by popping a pink ribbon on or wearing pink any time during October.

# How to do a breast self exam

## Step One: Touch

At the end of your monthly period, practice this breast self-exam. If you no longer have periods or your period is irregular, choose a specific day each month. This should not be performed in the shower or with lotion on your skin or fingers.



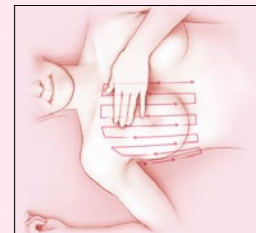
**1) Check the OUTER HALF of your right breast.** Lie down and roll on to your left side to examine your right breast. Place your right hand, palm up on your forehead. Your breast should lie as flat on your chest as possible. It may be easier and more comfortable if you put a pillow behind your shoulder or back.



**2) Using the flat pads of your three middle fingers—not the tips—move the pads of your fingers in little circles, about the size of a dime.** For each little circle, change the amount of pressure so you can feel ALL levels of your breast tissue. Make each circle three times—once light, once medium, and once deep—before you move on to the next area.



**3) Start the circles in your armpit and move down to just below the bra line.** Then slide your fingers over—just the width of one finger and move up again. Don't lift your fingers from your breast as you move them to make sure you feel the entire area. Continue this up-and-down vertical strip pattern—from your collarbone to just below your bra line—until you reach the nipple.



**4) Check the INNER HALF of your right breast.** When you reach the nipple, remove pillow, roll on to your back, remove your hand from your forehead and place this arm at a right angle (see drawing). Carefully check the nipple area using the same circular pressures as before, without squeezing. Then examine the remaining breast tissue using the up-and-down vertical strip pattern, until you reach the middle of your chest.

Roll on to your right side and switch hands to check your left breast.

## Step Two: Look



Stand in front of a mirror and look closely at your breasts in three positions:

- 1) Arms at your side**
- 2) Arms raised above your head bending forward**
- 3) Place hands on your hips and hunch over**



All three of these steps need to be viewed from the right and left as well as facing forward.

Check for changes in the following:

- **Shape:** Compare one to the other. One breast may normally be larger than the other, but sudden changes in size should not occur.
- **Skin:** Check for rash, redness, puckering, dimpling, or orange-peel-textured appearance.
- **Nipples:** Check for any physical changes such as a sudden inversion, scaliness, redness, itching, swelling, or discharge.
- **Vein patterns:** Look for a noticeable increase in size or number of veins compared to the other breast.



**Repeat this exam every month—even if you're pregnant—to become more familiar with how your breasts normally look and feel.**

**If you find a lump or notice other unusual changes:** Don't panic. About 80% of lumps found are not cancerous. See your doctor promptly for further evaluation.