

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Better Detection of Breast Cancer \*

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It is usually difficult to adopt new ways of doing things. To detect potential cancers, women have been traditionally examining themselves by using a circular or radial method. In the 1970s, psychologist Henry Pennypacker noted that most women could not detect cancerous lumps in the breast, until they were so large that they were hard to treat.

*"I figured if we can teach the fingers to read Braille, then we can surely teach them to find breasts lumps smaller than golf balls.... In the garment industry, workers can distinguish between different types of fabrics just by feeling them. We decided to extend this sort of touch intelligence to finding a lump in the breast."*

Along with his associate, psychologist Mark Goldstein, they wanted to apply psychological principles to improve medical care. In this case, it was an area of psychology called **psychophysics** — the way the brain interprets what we sense. In 1974, with physicians, biomedical engineers and technicians, they started to explore *touch* — how fingers can be educated to detect changes in breast tissue. With extensive research, they developed a new method of breast examination using **vertical strips** called **MammaCare**.

According to nurse Terri Ades — editor of *Health Content* for the American Cancer Society — they have developed silicon breast models that have led to major advance in the breast self-exam. From studies done, women can detect smaller lumps when they are taught to —

- Detect the difference between probable cancerous lumps and natural fibrous tissue in their breasts.
- Examine a larger area of the upper body using vertical strips. On each side, the range is from the armpit to the breastbone in the center of the chest. Vertically, it ranges from the collar bone to the bottom bra line. (About 60% of lumps are found outside of the main breast.)
- Use varying levels of pressure when examining the breast — light, medium and deep.

This vertical strip method is used by about 250,000 women. Studies have shown that it is better than the radial or circular methods in detecting cancerous lumps. One of these appears is the journal, *Annals of Internal Medicine* (1990, Vol. 12, No. 10, pages 772-779).

In 1982, Pennypacker formed his own company — **Mammatech** — to market this new method. Even with the extensive research and positive findings, many medical practitioners continue to use the traditional methods. Pennypacker indicates this is because he has not strongly marketed his product. Complete instructions can be obtained from a physician, nurse or Mammatech staff member. Learning this method typically takes about an hour. Here is the basic procedure.

- **Silicon breast models** are used to train the women. They learn to touch the models to distinguish between normal breast tissues — fatty, knotty and cystic breast masses — and abnormal lumps.
- Women memorize a vertical pattern of examining every possible inch of their breast tissue. On her back, the woman bends her knees over to one side. The opposite hand is placed, palm up, on the forehead. Starting from the top of the armpit, the woman moves her middle three fingers in small circles. She checks up and down in overlapping vertical strips across to the nipple. When she reaches the nipple, she keeps her fingers there and rolls flat on to her back. Then she continues the vertical strips to the center of her chest — from the collar bone to the bra line. The procedure is repeated with the other breast.
- In contrast to their fingertips, they are trained to use the pads of their three middle fingers to cover more tissue.
- Women are trained to use different levels of pressure when they press the tissue. With each set of circular movements, they first push lightly and then moderately. Finally, they push firmly down to the ribs with the third circle. In this way, they can better detect lumps attached to the rib cage, free-floating lumps, or those attached to the outermost layer of the breast.

If the woman finds an unusual lump, she needs to check for a similar one in her other breast. If the lump is found only in one breast, she should record its position and consult her physician.

If you want to learn this method, contact your medical provider. If you cannot receive training from your provider, you can contact the Mammatech company directly. For less than \$75, they will send you their training kit with a video and a silicon breast model. You can contact them directly with their toll-free phone line — **1-800-626-2273**. In addition, they also have their own web site at <http://www.mammacare.com>.

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**The earlier any cancer is detected,  
the easier it is to treat.**

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Just so you know, I do not have stock — or other any connection — with the Mammatech company. However, I know that one out of every eight women will get breast cancer in their lifetime. If you are one of these eight, I want you to be able to detect it as early as possible, so it can be dealt with more easily and effectively. This method is approved by the American Cancer Society.

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\* Adapted from Bridget Murray's "Vertical-strips method for breast self-exam uses 'touch intelligence,'" and "Performing a breast exam using the vertical-strips method," [\*APA Monitor\*](#), December, 1998, pages 12-13.