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GYNAECOLOGY

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## Breast Self-Examination Technique Among Climacteric Women

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective** To assess the actual steps taken in breast self-examination of climacteric women.

**Design** Retrospective descriptive study.

**Setting** Menopause clinic, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. Faculty of Medicine, Ramathibodi Hospital, Mahidol University.

**Subjects** Three hundred and thirty-six women attending menopause clinic during September, 1995 to March, 1996.

**Results** Fifty-three percent of the respondents had previously received breast self-examination (BSE) instruction. Not more than four percent in this group performed all of the recommended BSE steps. Nine of fourteen steps were reportedly practiced by over fifty percent and step 9 was the most commonly practiced.

**Conclusion** This study revealed that eventhough half of the climacteric women had previously received BSE instruction, very few women actually carried out these procedures. Appropriate selection of practical BSE steps for Thai women may be an important part in enhancement of more correctly BSE performance.

**Key words :** breast self-examination performance, climacteric women.

Breast self-examination (BSE) is one of the health promotion strategies and common preventive practice to ensure early detection of disease of the breast. Breast cancer affects women of all ages, it tends to occur more frequent in the perimenopausal year<sup>(1)</sup> and elderly women.<sup>(2)</sup>

BSE is a screening procedure that every woman can perform to detect any changes or lumps in her breasts. Women should get to know their breasts and be responsible to notice any changes in their breasts earlier. Appropriate palpation technique and step in performing proper BSE are

required. Though they learn BSE technique from leaflets, audiovisual materials and health resources, the effectiveness of BSE practice should be assessed especially in climacteric women.

This study aims to assess the actual steps taken in breast self-examination of the women attending menopause clinic, Ramathibodi Hospital.

## Materials and methods

The questionnaires consisted of demographic informations, previous receipt of BSE instruction and questions assessing the practice of all the BSE steps. The 14-item checklist (Table 1) indicated complete performance of BSE steps were distributed to the women attending the menopause clinic, Ramathibodi Hospital, during September, 1995 to March, 1996. Most of the

questionnaires were completed by the subjects themselves. Some were assisted in completing the questionnaires by having the statement read to them and then the women filled up the questionnaires. Three hundred and thirty-six questionnaires were analysed.

## Results

### Demographic characteristics

Mean age of the respondents was 52.7  $\pm$  5.7 years (range = 40-72). Of all the women being studied, 43.9 percent graduated with bachelor degree or higher, 23.3 percent were from vocational colleges. Majority of the respondents worked for the government (52.4%) and 26.5 percent were housewife.

### Previous receipt of BSE instruction.

Of all the respondents, 53 percent reported

**Table 1.** 14 recommended BSE steps performance

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### Breast self-examination steps<sup>4</sup>

- Step 1** Examine your breasts after you take a bath.
  - Step 2** Look at your breasts in the mirror with your arms at your side.
  - Step 3** Look at your breasts in the mirror with your arms raised over your head.
  - Step 4** Look at your breasts in the mirror with your hands on your hip.
  - Step 5** When looking at your breasts in the mirror, look for swelling, dimpling of the skin or changes in the nipples.
  - Step 6** Examine your breasts while lying down.
  - Step 7** When lying down, place a towel or pillow under your shoulders before examining your breast on that side.
  - Step 8** When lying down, place your hand above your head before examining your breast on that side.
  - Step 9** Use your right hand to examine your left breast and your left hand to examine your right breast.
  - Step 10** Examine one breast at a time.
  - Step 11** Examine your breasts in a circular motion moving from the outside in.
  - Step 12** When examining your breasts, feel for lumps or thickening.
  - Step 13** When examining your breasts, also feel your armpit area.
  - Step 14** Squeeze the nipple of each breast to look for discharge.
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**Table 2.** Number and percentage of those who completely performed all BSE steps and of the non performed group comparing between those who received and not received BSE instruction

Previous receipt of BSE instruction	total N	performed completely n (%)	Non performed n (%)
received	178 (53.0)	7 (2.1)	9 (2.7)
not received	158 (47.0)	3 (0.9)	46 (13.7)
<b>Total</b>	<b>336 (100.0)</b>	<b>10 (3.0)</b>	<b>55 (16.4)</b>

receiving BSE instruction before attending the menopause clinic. The demographic characteristics of this particular group of respondents (53%) were as follows ; 56.4 percent were in age group 45-49 years, 55.1 percent graduated with bachelor degree or higher and 59.7 percent were government officer.

**Breast self-examination step performance.**

Only three percent of total respondents reportedly performed all the recommended BSE step while 16.4 percent did not performed at all. In the previous receipt of BSE instruction group, 2.1 percent performed all BSE steps and 2.7 percent did not performed at all. Comparing with those who never received BSE instruction, 0.9 percent performed all the steps and 13.7 percent did not performed at all. (Table 2)

Of the 14 BSE steps, three (step 1, 9, 12) were reported practice by more than half of the respondents. BSE step 9 was the most commonly practiced (62.8%), while BSE step 7 was the least (9.5%).

Among the women who previously received BSE instruction, 9 of 14 steps (step 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13) were reportedly performed from

51.7 to 78.7 percent. BSE step 9 was the most commonly practiced (78.7%). On the contrary, the group that did not receive BSE instruction reported less practice of all the 14-steps (4.4-44.9%) (Figure 1).

**Discussion**

The results demonstrated that only half of the respondents previously received BSE instruction. Most of them were in 45-49 years of age, graduated with bachelor degree or higher and were government officer. This can be probably shows that younger, educated and government officers have more chance to get informations and more concern about their health.

The finding that the respondents who previously received BSE instruction (group A) reportedly practiced the BSE steps more than the women who did not received the instruction (group B). This corresponds with the study of Champion.<sup>(3)</sup> In group A, 9 of 14 steps were reportedly practiced by over 50 percent. In contrast, all of the steps were reportedly practiced less than 50 percent in group B. Hence, more effort is needed to encourage women particularly those in climacteric period to practice proper BSE steps, because this is an important strategy in

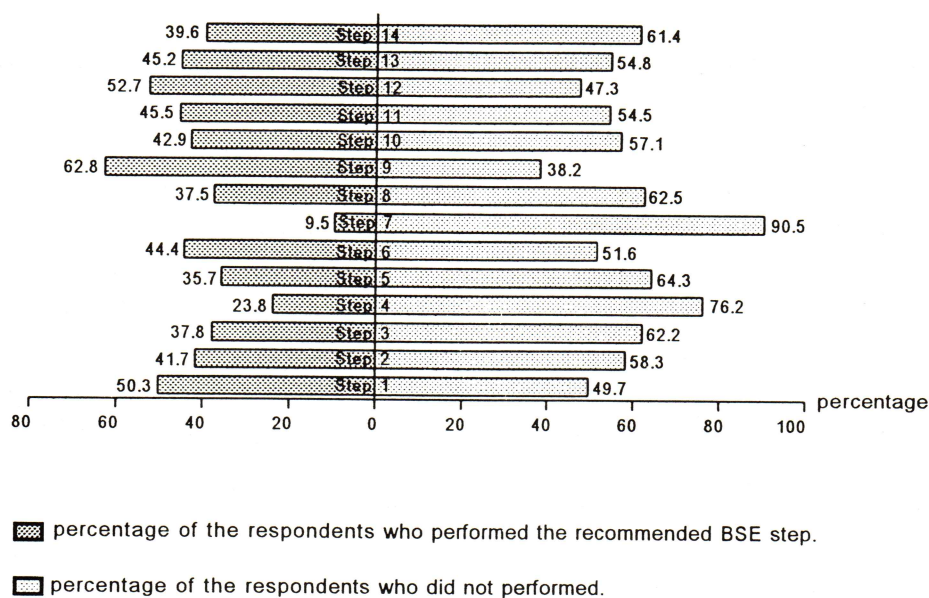


Fig. 1. Percentage of the respondents distributed by BSE step performance. (n = 336).

early detection of breast disease.

According to the BSE step performance, BSE step 9, which use the right hand to examine the left breast and the left hand to examine the right breast was the most commonly practiced in both groups (A and B : 78.7 and 44.9% respectively). In group A, BSE step 6 (examining the breasts while lying down) was the second most commonly practiced (68.5%). BSE step 11 (examining the breasts in a circular motion moving from the outside in) and BSE step 12 (feeling for lumps or thickening while examining the breasts) were the third (64%). But in group B, BSE step 12 (feeling for lumps or thickening while examining the breasts) was the second (39.9%), and the third was BSE step 1 (examining the breasts during the bath) (37.3%). The least practice of both groups is similar to the findings of Lashley,<sup>(4)</sup> which were BSE step 7 (placing a towel or pillow under the shoulders when lying down before examining the breast at that side) (A and B : 14.0 and 4.4% respectively).

The result of this study revealed that most of the respondents practiced the main BSE step

(step 9). In addition, group A seems to perform breast self-examination technique more systematically (step 11) and probably more efficiently in lump detection (step 12).

Concerning some BSE steps which are less commonly practiced, it may be due to too many recommended steps in performing BSE or women are unfamiliar in performing all the BSE steps. Some women may feel discomfort and embarrass to touch their own breasts. Nurses may conduct BSE teaching in more private environment with some simple steps to follow. Let them have opportunity to examine their breasts at that time and reassures them to go through properly. It may be more effective if every woman performs all recommended BSE steps regularly once a month. However, it is not probably practical for Thai women to do all the BSE steps completely, because of unprivacy environment in their houses and inconvenience bathroom which has no large mirror for looking at their own breasts. The recommended BSE steps for Thai women are the step 1, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14. The impact of this study is the selection of the

appropriate and practical BSE steps based on the effective actual performance.

## Summary

The low proportion of the women attending menopause clinic who performed the recommended BSE steps should be concerned. Eventhough half of the respondents previously received BSE instruction, most of them did not comply with all the BSE steps. BSE teaching programme with appropriate teaching aids, attractive easy reading and understanding pamphlets, including individual teaching through demonstration and women participation are

necessary to improve individual BSE performance.

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