Benign lumps in the breast

You don’t necessarily have cancer just because you felt a lump in your breast. Here are the three most common types of such growths.

Ladies, you can breathe a sigh of relief — the majority of lumps that develop in the breast are benign.

Oestrogen may have a role to play in the development of these growths. The use of hormone replacement therapy may increase both the density of the breast tissue and occurrence of some of these benign conditions. However, the shape and size of the breast do not play a part.

3 common types of lumps

• Fibroadenomas
These are the most common benign growths in the breast, affecting thousands of women in Singapore annually. They occur mostly in women of reproductive age, especially those in their 20s, and have been observed to run in the family. There is no specific cause of a fibroadenoma. It usually appears as a smooth, painless and very mobile lump in one breast — which is why it is sometimes referred to as ‘breast mouse’. However, up to 15% of cases occur as multiple lumps in both breasts.

• Breast cysts
These are fluid-filled lumps, each enclosed by a membrane. They are more common in pre-menopausal women aged between 35 and 50 years, but can be found in women of any age. Multiple cysts can be present in both breasts, and most of them do not require any treatment unless they cause pain and discomfort.

• Physiological lumps
On many occasions, these growths are physiological swellings of the breast, occurring as a result of hormonal changes. They can be rather uncomfortable, especially before menses; they also tend to go away after your period. If they present after your period, they are termed fibrocystic changes.

Confirming benign status
Through a physical examination, an experienced breast specialist should be able to determine with some certainty whether a lump is benign or malignant.

Although a mammogram or an ultrasound can help the specialist with a diagnosis, the only way to confirm whether lumps are benign or malignant is through a biopsy followed by examination under microscopy. Pain and size are not indicators of malignancy.

Will it turn malignant?
Fibroadenomas and simple breast cysts do not carry any malignant potential. It’s safe to leave them alone as they will not increase the risk of getting breast cancer. But as they are breast tissue, they hence carry the same risk as other normal breast tissue.