

Mammography and Other Screening Tests for Breast Problems

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In the United States, one in eight women will develop breast cancer by age 75. Regular breast screening can help find cancer at an early and more curable stage. Screening can also find problems in the breasts that are not cancer.

What is mammography?

[Mammography](#) is the primary tool used to screen for breast cancer and other problems. Mammography uses X-ray technology to view the breasts. The images created are called a [mammogram](#). A physician called a radiologist reads the images.

Why is mammography done?

Mammography is done for two reasons:

1. As a screening test to check for breast cancer if you do not have signs or symptoms.
2. As a diagnostic test to check lumps or other symptoms that you have found yourself or that have been found by an [obstetrician–gynecologist \(ob-gyn\)](#) or other health care professional.

This FAQ focuses on screening mammography.

How should I prepare for a mammogram?

On the day of your mammogram, wear a dark, comfortable top. You will need to remove your top and undergarments for the exam. You may want to bring a change of clothes with you.

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What happens during a mammogram?

- You undress from the waist up and put on a gown.
- Then you stand in front of an X-ray machine.
- The technician helps you place one of your breasts between two flat plastic plates. For the scan, the plates flatten your breast as much as possible so that the most amount of tissue can be viewed. This causes firm pressure on your breast.
- These steps are repeated to take a side view of the same breast.
- The test is then done on the other breast.

Is it painful to get a mammogram?

The pressure of the plates often makes the breasts ache. This discomfort is brief. If you are still having menstrual periods, you may want to have the test done in the week right after your period. The breasts are often less tender after your period.

What do the results mean?

Radiologists use a system called BI-RADS to classify mammography results. Your screening mammogram result is given a score. Scores range from 0 to 5 and mean the following:

0—More information is needed. You may need another mammogram before a score can be given.

1—Not

2—Ben

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3—Sor

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4—Sor

5—Something is seen that is highly suggestive of cancer. You will need to have a biopsy.

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My mammogram report mentions breast density. What is this?

Fibrous tissue and fat give breasts their shape. When breasts are dense, they have more fibrous tissue and less fat. [Breast density](#) is a normal and common finding on a mammogram, but breast density may make it harder for a radiologist to see cancer. If your report says you have dense breasts, your ob-gyn or other health care professional may discuss other screening tests in addition to mammography.

What does it mean to be at average risk of breast cancer?

You may be at high risk of breast cancer if you have certain risk factors. These risk factors include a family history of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, or other inherited types of cancer; [BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations](#); chest radiation treatments at a young age; and a history of high-risk breast biopsy results. If you don't have these risk factors, you are at average risk.

When should I start having screening mammography?

If you are at average risk of breast cancer, screening mammography is recommended every 1 to 2 years beginning at age 40. Screening should continue until at least age 75.

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How is a clinical breast exam done?

Your ob-gyn or other health care professional may examine your breasts during routine checkups. This is called a clinical breast exam. The exam may be done while you are lying down or sitting up. The breasts are checked for any changes in size or shape, puckers, dimples, or redness of the skin. Your ob-gyn or other health care professional may feel for changes in each breast and under each arm.

How often should I have a clinical breast exam?

If you are at average risk of breast cancer and do not have symptoms, the following are suggested:

- Clinical breast exam every 1 to 3 years when you are 25 to 39 years old
- Clinical breast exam every year when you are 40 and older

What is breast self-awareness?

Breast self-awareness focuses on having a sense of what is normal for your breasts so that you can tell if there are changes—even small changes—and report them to your ob-gyn or other health care professional.

Why is breast self-awareness important?

Breast cancer is often found by a woman herself. This happens in almost one half of all cases. About 70% of breast lumps turn out to be benign.

How can I learn more?

Before you

- What
- What
- How

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You can ask more specific questions based on your age. If you are 40 to 75 years old:

- What are the pros and cons of getting mammograms every 2 years instead of every year?

If you are older than 75:

- Do I need to keep having mammograms?

You and your ob-gyn or other health care professional should share information, talk about your wishes, and agree on how often you will have breast screening.

Glossary

Benign: Not cancer.

Biopsy: A minor surgical procedure to remove a small piece of tissue. This tissue is examined under a microscope in a laboratory.

BRCA1 and BRCA2: Genes that keep cells from growing too rapidly. Changes in these genes have been linked to an increased risk of cancer in the breasts, ovaries, and other parts of the body.

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If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you](#).

FAQ178

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