

What you need to know about **Mammograms**



You can develop breast cancer at any age, but your risk goes up as you get older. If you are a woman 40 years of age or older, talk with a doctor about the breast cancer screening plan that's best for you.

Screening for breast cancer can help find it early. Finding breast cancer early – when it's small, has not spread, and might be easier to treat – can help prevent deaths from the disease.

How is breast cancer found early?

Breast cancer can be found early by getting a screening mammogram regularly. A mammogram is a low-dose x-ray of the breast. It can often help find breast cancer early, when it's small and even before a lump can be felt.

The American Cancer Society recommends the following screening schedule for women at average risk for breast cancer:

Women ages 40 to 44 should have the choice to start yearly breast cancer screening with a mammogram if they wish to do so.

Women ages 45 to 54 should get a mammogram every year.

Women 55 and older can keep getting screened every year or can switch to mammograms every 2 years.

Screening should continue as long as a woman is in good health and is expected to live at least 10 more years.

All women should understand what to expect when getting a mammogram for breast cancer screening – what the test can and cannot do. They should also be familiar with how their breasts normally look and feel and report any changes to a health care provider right away.

Women at high risk for breast cancer – because of their family history, a genetic mutation, or other risk factors – should be screened with a breast MRI along with a mammogram. Talk to your doctor about your risk for breast cancer and the best screening plan for you.

Common questions women have about breast cancer and mammograms

Mammograms are x-rays. Are they safe?

Over the years, both the machines and how mammograms are done have greatly improved. Today, the level of radiation is low and the benefits of mammograms outweigh any possible harm from being exposed to the radiation.

How can I prepare for a mammogram? What do I wear?

- If you're going to a facility for the first time, bring a list of the places and dates of mammograms, biopsies, or other breast treatments you've had before.
- If you've had mammograms at another facility, try to get those records to bring with you to the new facility (or have them sent there) so the old pictures can be compared to the new ones.
- Schedule your mammogram when your breasts are not tender or swollen to help reduce discomfort and get good pictures. Try to avoid the week just before your period.
- You might find it easier to wear a skirt or pants, so that you'll only need to remove your top and bra for the mammogram.
- On the day of the exam, don't wear deodorant, powder, or lotion under your arms. Some of these have substances that can show up as white spots on the x-ray.
- Discuss any recent changes or problems in your breasts with your health care provider before getting the mammogram.

- Use a facility that specializes in mammograms and does many mammograms a day.
- Try to go to the same facility every time so that your mammograms can easily be compared from year to year.

Mammograms cost a lot. How can I afford one?

Medicare, Medicaid, and almost all insurance plans cover yearly mammograms with no co-pay or other out-of-pocket costs. Talk with your insurance provider to see if you will have any co-pay or out-of-pocket costs. There are some free or low-cost mammogram programs, too. Some doctors, hospitals, or clinics also may lower their fees for women who can't afford the usual charge. Call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** to learn more about low-cost programs where you live.



What's it like to get a mammogram? Does it hurt? Is it embarrassing?

You'll have to undress above the waist to get a mammogram, but you will be given a wrap to wear. When you get a mammogram, you stand beside the machine, and a specially trained technologist helps place your breast on a plastic plate. A second plastic plate is put on top and pushed down to flatten the breast for a few seconds to get a good, clear picture. Two pictures usually are taken of each breast. Many women feel some discomfort. Tell the technologist if you have pain.

How will I get my mammogram results?

A specialist, called a radiologist, will look at the mammogram to see if there are any areas of concern. If you don't hear from your health care provider within 10 days, do not assume that your mammogram was normal. Call your provider or the facility where the mammogram was done and ask for your results.

What happens if they find something?

Getting called back after a screening mammogram is fairly common and doesn't mean you have breast cancer.

Getting called back happens more often after a first mammogram, or when there's no previous mammogram to compare the new mammogram with. It's also more common in women who haven't gone through menopause.

If a suspicious area is found, you may have more mammogram pictures taken. An ultrasound may also be done. This test will show if it's a fluid-filled cyst that's most likely not cancer, or a solid mass, which may or may not be cancer. Some women may need a breast MRI.

If the area still looks suspicious, a doctor may use a thin, hollow needle to take out a small piece of it. (Removing all or part of the suspicious area is called a biopsy.) This piece is tested in a lab to see if there are cancer cells in it.

A biopsy is the only sure way to know if you have breast cancer.

But even if you're told you need a biopsy, remember that not all lumps or suspicious areas are cancer.

If the biopsy shows that you have cancer, you and your doctor will discuss treatment options. Early breast cancer often can be treated by taking out the lump or part of the breast rather than removing the whole breast.



Get regular mammograms.

Regular breast cancer screening with mammograms can often help find breast cancer early – when it’s small, has not spread, and might be easier to treat. This is when there are more treatment choices and treatment works best.

You need to know about mammograms! Here are some breast cancer screening steps you may be willing to take. They could help save your life!

- I will call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** or go online to **www.cancer.org** to find out more about mammograms and breast cancer.
- I will ask my doctor or nurse how to get a mammogram.
- I will schedule my mammogram.
- I will call if I don’t get the results of my mammogram.



cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345

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When we walk together, we're one step closer to beating breast cancer.

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