

# Frequently asked questions about **BREAST CANCER SCREENING**

A HEALTHY YOU



## What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is an X-ray of the breast. It looks for lumps or tumors that are too small for you to feel with your fingertips. The test may also find unhealthy changes in your breast ducts (thin tubes which allow fluids to pass). These changes can become breast cancer. A screening mammogram helps to find breast cancer early. It screens a woman who has no clear signs or symptoms of breast cancer.

## Why should you get screened for breast cancer?

Regular screening tests are a key for you to take control of your body and your health. Breast cancer continues to be a major cause of death in women. Screening mammograms give women the best hope for preventing breast cancer death. They often can catch breast cancer long before other methods of screening, and before it has a chance to spread.

Some women do not want to receive a mammogram. There are many things that can get in the way.

Common barriers for being screened for breast cancer include:

- being too busy,
- fear of pain or discomfort,
- embarrassment,
- weight issues,
- fear of what you might find out by taking the test,
- cultural beliefs,
- concerns about X-rays,
- preference for some other type of screening,
- or the belief that you are not at risk.

## When should you get a screening mammogram? How often?

- Younger than 40: Mammogram screening is not recommended at these ages.
- Age 40 to 49: Talk with your doctor about your need for a mammogram. You can then decide if you would like to be screened.
- Age 50 to 74: Mammography screening is recommended every one to two years.
- Age 75 and older: Talk with your doctor about the benefits and harms of mammography. You can then decide if you would like to be screened.

There are breast cancer screenings that can be performed at any age. These are clinical breast examinations (exams of the breast by a clinician). Although Breast Self Examinations (BSE) are not generally recommended, you should still become familiar with your breasts so that if you notice any changes you can discuss it with your doctor. Discuss the benefits and risks of these screenings with your doctor.

## How is a mammogram performed?

When you get a mammogram, you check in and go to a dressing room. There, you undress from the waist up and put on a gown. Then, you go into a special room, where the mammogram machine is. A specially-trained staff person places your breast between two panels and compresses (applies pressure), so the machine will be able to pick up enough details to find possible problems. An X-ray picture is then taken of your breast while it is compressed. This can be uncomfortable for some women, especially those with smaller breasts, however it should not be painful.

When you prepare for a mammogram, you can take some steps to limit discomfort (see next section). The whole process usually takes less than a minute per breast.

### How do you prepare for a mammogram?

The following general guidelines and tips can help you get a more useful and comfortable mammogram:

- If you normally have painful breasts during your period, schedule your mammogram for one to two weeks after your period.
- If you believe your breasts may hurt during the mammogram, take ibuprofen or acetaminophen (pain reliever) two hours before coming to your appointment.
- Limiting your caffeine for three to five days before your appointment can also decrease discomfort.
- Wear a shirt with shorts, pants, or a skirt so you can undress from the waist up only.
- If you have breast implants, be certain to tell staff that you have them at the time you make an appointment.
- Avoid wearing deodorant, perfume, lotion, or powder under your arms or on your breasts on the day of your appointment. These interfere with the exam and may show up as shadows on your mammogram.

### What are the risks of screening mammograms?

Some women worry that the X-rays in a mammogram might raise their risk of cancer. The amount of X-rays in a mammogram is very low. It is less than a dental X-ray. The risk from the X-rays is far outweighed by the benefits of screening. The risks of screening mammograms do include the following:

- A mammogram may show things that turn out not to be cancer.
- Some fast-growing tumors may grow large or spread to other parts of the body before a mammogram finds them.

### What can you do to protect yourself and lower your risk from breast cancer?

If you ever notice a lump in your breast, discharge (unusual leakage) from your nipple, or other skin changes on your breast, you should contact your doctor immediately. Don't wait for your next screening mammogram.

Some of the known factors that may raise your risk for breast cancer include:

- A personal history of breast cancer or benign (non-cancer) breast disease.
- A history of breast cancer in your mother or sister.
- A history of radiation therapy to your breast or chest.

If any of the factors apply to you, you may need to be screened more often than usual. Talk with your doctor to determine a schedule that's best for you.

There are several things you can do to reduce your risk of breast cancer:

- Have regular mammograms appropriate for your age group and any risk factors you may have.
- Eat well—limit your intake of fat, and increase fiber, fruits, and vegetables.
- Move more—being physically active can lower your risk.

### What are some cultural concerns?

Some racial/ethnic and sexual orientation groups may be at greater risk from breast cancer. They may have different risk factors because of their culture. Most importantly, they may be less likely to screen, so breast cancer may go undetected until it is far advanced. If you are Black, Latina, Asian-American, Pacific Islander, or Lesbian, you should especially consider regular screening.

### How can you learn more about breast cancer screening?

- Visit [kp.org/mammograms](http://kp.org/mammograms).

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have further questions, please consult your health care professional. Adapted from Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of the Northwest.