

# Frequently asked questions about breast cancer screening

## What is a mammogram?

A *mammogram* is an X-ray of the breast. A mammogram 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. These changes can become *breast cancer*. A *screening mammogram* helps to catch breast cancer early. It involves screening a woman who has no clear signs or symptoms of breast cancer.

## Why should I get screened for breast cancer?

Regular screening tests are an important way for you to take control of your body and your health. Breast cancer is a major cause of death in women. Screening mammograms provide women with the best hope for preventing breast-cancer death. They usually can catch breast cancer before other methods of screening can, 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 reasons include being too busy, fear of pain or discomfort, embarrassment, weight issues, fear of what you might find out by taking the test, concerns about X-rays, preference for some other type of screening, or the belief that you are not at risk for breast cancer. Talk with your clinician to address any concerns you may have.

The decision to screen is an important personal one. It is helpful to sort through your reasons both against and for screening. We urge you to discuss your concerns and explore ways to address them. We also encourage you to find out more about mammograms and breast cancer screening – and what you can do to get involved and stay involved with your health.

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

- Age 20 to 39: Regular mammography screening is not recommended.
- Age 40 to 49: Talk with your doctor about the benefits of mammography. You can then decide if you would like to be screened.

- Age 50 to 74: Mammography screening is recommended at least every 2 years.
- Age 75 to 79: Talk with your clinician about the benefits 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 doctor) and breast self-examinations (exams you perform on yourself at home). 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 2 panels and squeezes (compresses) it, so the machine will be able to pick up enough details to detect 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.

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



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## How do I prepare for a mammogram?

These tips can help you get a more useful and comfortable mammogram:

- If you typically have painful breasts during your period, schedule your mammogram for 1–2 weeks after your period.
- If you believe your breasts may hurt during the mammogram, take ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) or acetaminophen (Tylenol) 2 hours before coming to your appointment.
- Limiting your caffeine for 3–5 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. They may show up as shadows on your mammogram.

## What are the risks of screening mammograms?

Some women are concerned the X-rays in a mammogram might increase their risk of cancer. The amount of X-rays in a mammogram is very low (less than a dental X-ray). We know that the risk from being exposed to these X-rays is much less than the benefits of screening and catching potential breast cancers early. The risks of screening mammograms do include the following:

- A mammogram may miss some cancers.
- 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 I do to protect myself and limit my risk from breast cancer?

If you ever notice a lump in your breast, discharge from your nipple, or other noticeable skin changes on your breast, you should contact your doctor immediately rather than waiting for a screening mammogram.

Some of the known things that may leave you at a higher risk for breast cancer include:

- Getting older.
- 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 these 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 that fit 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 active can lower your risk.

## What are some cultural considerations?

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 I learn more about breast cancer screening?

Go to [kp.org/womenshealth](http://kp.org/womenshealth) and browse the common women's health concerns section to find "breast cancer," then "exams and tests."

## How can I schedule a screening mammogram?

- Schedule online at [kp.org/appointments](http://kp.org/appointments).
- Call 1-888-810-7499.

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