

Don't let mammograms scare you to death



Learn more about mammograms for breast cancer screening

Your own vigilance is the best defense against cancer. This entails three things:

- Making lifestyle changes that may prevent cancer
- Monitoring your own body for symptoms and signs of cancer
- Making sure that you are screened regularly by your healthcare provider

We've discussed lifestyle changes in other materials. Here we'll discuss what to look for in the cancers we've been discussing. In particular, we want to talk frankly about mammograms for breast cancer screening.

Breast cancer symptoms and screening

Some people don't have any signs or symptoms of breast cancer. There are breast changes that can indicate cancer, but they may not be cancer related. If you have any of the symptoms below, don't guess — make an appointment with your healthcare provider.

- New lump in the breast or underarm (armpit)
- Thickening or swelling of part of the breast
- Irritation or dimpling of breast skin
- Redness or flaky skin in the nipple area or the breast
- Pulling in of the nipple or pain in the nipple area
- Nipple discharge other than breast milk, including blood
- Any change in the size or the shape of the breast
- Pain in any area of the breast



Let's talk about mammograms. You can't prevent cancer with screening, but you may catch breast cancer early, when it's easier to treat. Regular mammograms are the best tests doctors have to find breast cancer early, sometimes up to three years before you can feel a lump.² For example, the U.S. Preventive Service Task Force recommends mammograms every two years from ages 50-74 for women without risk.³ Find out what your healthcare provider recommends. Each woman's situation is different, and your doctor may want you to have a mammogram earlier.

Another variance when it comes to breast cancer screening concerns genetic predisposition due to mutations of the BRCA genes, BRCA1 and BRCA2. These genes normally function to suppress tumors. However, in relatively rare cases when these genes mutations are present, a woman's risk of breast cancer and ovarian cancer is greatly increased. The mutation is inherited — if a parent has the mutation, there is a 50 percent chance of a child inheriting the mutation.⁶

In the general population, the incidence of BRCA1 mutation is between one in 500 and one in 800. The incidence of BRCA2 mutation is even lower. Individuals with Ashkenazi Jewish background have an increased incidence of BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations.⁴ The United States Preventive Services Task Force recommends that women with a personal history of, or who have family members with, breast, ovarian, fallopian tube, or peritoneal cancer be evaluated to see if they have a mutation.⁵ They also recommend that women who have an ancestry associated with breast cancer susceptibility be evaluated for the mutation. The initial evaluation can be done by your primary care physician who assesses the viability of a mutation based on specific guidelines of family history that needs to be met. From there, a genetic counselor can further evaluate if a genetic test is needed and then, if necessary, a BRCA mutation test is performed, most commonly with a blood sample. A positive test indicates a person is more susceptible to breast cancer, ovarian cancer, as well as several additional types of cancers than the average person. This can mean increased frequency of mammograms and at a younger age. Speak to your healthcare provider if you have a family history of cancers.

A mammogram is like an x-ray machine. In order to get a good picture of breast tissue, the technician will use plates to flatten out the breast. The technician will take multiple pictures of each breast. You'll only feel this pressure for a few seconds. The compression can certainly be uncomfortable, even painful. Try to remind yourself — for those few seconds — that any one of these images may detect cancer at the early stage of development.

You may also be shy about having a technician positioning your breasts. You should share this with the technician. Ask to cover up with a hospital gown when the technician is reviewing images. You only need to undress from the waist up, so wear slacks or a skirt if you would feel more comfortable.

One other suggestion: Try not to schedule your mammogram the week before or during your period. Your breasts may be more tender, which may make the mammogram more uncomfortable.

1. https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast/basic_info/prevention.htm, September 2020

2. https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast/basic_info/prevention.htm, September 2020

3. <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/Page/Document/RecommendationStatementFinal/breast-cancer-screening1>, accessed September 2020

4. <http://medicineworld.org/cancer/breast/brcal-and-brc2-breast-cancer-associated-genes.html>, accessed August 2021

5. <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/Page/Document/UpdateSummaryFinal/breast-related-cancer-risk-assessment-genetic-counseling-and-genetic-testing>, August 2019

6. <https://www.cancer.gov/types/breast/hp/breast-ovarian-genetics-pdq>, accessed August 2021

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