

Don't let mammograms scare you to death



Breast cancer symptoms

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.¹

- 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

The best defense against breast cancer

Vigilance

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

- 1. Making lifestyle changes that may prevent or reduce your risk of breast cancer.** Even for people with high risk of breast cancer, research shows that lifestyle changes can decrease the risk of breast cancer. This includes limiting alcohol consumption, maintaining a healthy weight, staying physically active, breast-feeding (if you're able) and limiting hormone therapies.
- 2. Monitoring your own body for signs and symptoms of breast cancer.** Frequent checks can help spot cancer early. Self-exams are encouraged for adults of all ages at least once a month. Self-exams can be performed by touch, either when in the shower or lying down, and visual inspection in front of a mirror. If you notice any changes in your breasts or chest area, consult with your doctor.
- 3. Making sure that you are screened regularly by your healthcare provider.** Mammograms can show a lump before it can be felt. That's why it's important to have regularly scheduled mammograms to help detect breast cancer as early as possible. Talk with your doctor about the frequency that's right for you, based on familial breast cancer history, personal history with breast cancer or severity of symptoms.

Importance of routine mammograms

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 before you can feel a lump. Recommendations for screenings for women ages 40 to 49 vary somewhat among leading organizations. Women who are 40 to 49 years old should talk to their doctor or other healthcare professional about when to start and how often to get a mammogram. Most health insurance plans are required to cover screening mammograms every one to two years for women beginning at age 40 with no out-of-pocket cost.² 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.^{3,4} 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, ovarian cancer, pancreatic cancer and some other cancers is greatly increased. Men with a BRCA gene mutation are at increased risk of breast cancer (although this risk is lower than in women to begin with), prostate cancer and possibly some other cancers. The mutation is inherited — if a parent has the mutation, there is a 50 percent chance of a child inheriting the mutation.

In the general population, the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes account for 5% to 10% of all female breast cancers and 15% to 20% of all familial breast cancers. These variations are rare (about 1 in 400) in the general population, but occur slightly more often in certain ethnic or geographically-isolated groups, such as those of Ashkenzai (Eastern European) Jewish descent (about 1 in 40). Recent studies also document increased frequency of BRCA mutations among Black and Hispanic breast cancer patients.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. 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. If necessary, a BRCA mutation test is performed, most commonly with a blood sample. A positive test indicates a person is more susceptible than the average person to breast and ovarian cancer, as well as several additional types of cancers. This can mean mammograms at an increased frequency and at a younger age. Speak to your healthcare provider if you have a family history of cancers.^{3,4}

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.⁵

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.

Sources:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What Are the Symptoms of Breast Cancer? September 20, 2021. Available from www.cdc.gov.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What Is Breast Cancer Screening? September 22, 2021. Available from www.cdc.gov.
3. American Cancer Society. Genetic Counseling and Testing for Breast Cancer Risk, December 16, 2021. Available from www.cancer.org.
4. American Cancer Society. Breast Cancer Facts & Figures 2019-2020. Atlanta: American Cancer Society, Inc. 2019.
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What Is a Mammogram? September 21, 2021. Available from www.cdc.gov.

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