What You Need to Know About Mammograms

Mammograms (breast x-rays) are the best screening tool to find breast cancer early, when treatment is more likely to be successful.

If you've been told you need a mammogram, or you're ready to start breast cancer screening, knowing what to expect can help make the process more comfortable.

What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is a low-dose x-ray of the breast that's used to look for breast changes. It can be used as a screening test in people who don't have any symptoms or in people who have symptoms that might be from cancer.

You can develop breast cancer at any age, but your risk goes up as you get older.

How is breast cancer found early?

Mammograms can show changes in breast tissue that can't be seen or felt. A mammogram can't tell you for sure that a change is cancer. But they can help your doctor decide if more testing is needed to rule out cancer.

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

Women between 40 and 44 have the option to start screening with a mammogram every year.

Women 45 to 54 should get mammograms every year.

Women 55 and older can switch to a mammogram every other year, or they can choose to continue yearly mammograms. 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. You should also be familiar with how your breasts normally look and feel and report any changes to your doctor right away.

Women at high risk for breast cancer should get a breast MRI and a mammogram every year, typically starting at age 30.

Things that can increase a person's risk for breast cancer include:

- Having a family history of breast cancer
- Having certain inherited gene changes (like *BRCA1* and *BRCA2*)
- Having radiation to the chest before age 30

Talk with your doctor about your risk for breast cancer and the best screening plan for you.

Mammograms are x-rays. Are they safe?

Mammograms are done with a machine that only looks at breast tissue. The machine takes x-rays at lower doses of radiation than the x-rays done to look at other parts of the body.

How do I get ready for a mammogram?

If you're getting your first mammogram or looking for a new place to get one, try to find a place that specializes in them. You can find this information online, or you can call the facility and ask.

When you find a place that you like, try to keep using it. Having all your mammograms at the same place will make it easier for doctors to compare your images from one year to the next.

If you're going somewhere new but have had mammograms before, bring a list of where you've gone, as well as the dates of any mammograms, biopsies, or other breast testing you've had before. Ask your old place if they can send records of your past mammograms or tests to the new place.

Here are some tips on scheduling your mammogram and what to do on the day of your appointment.

- Schedule your mammogram when your breasts are not tender to reduce discomfort. The more comfortable you are, the

better the pictures they can get of your breast tissue. If you still get periods, try to avoid the week just before your period.

- Wear a two-piece outfit because you'll need to remove your top and bra for the exam.
- On the day of your appointment, don't wear deodorant, powder, or lotion under your arms. These products can show up as white spots on the x-ray.

The entire mammogram takes about 20 minutes. A specially trained mammographer will place your breast between two plastic plates for a few seconds while an x-ray is taken. The plates are repositioned, and a second x-ray is taken of the same breast. You'll then have the same done on the other breast.

Sometimes, squeezing the breast between the plates can be uncomfortable. Tell the mammographer if you're feeling pain so they can try to make it more comfortable.

Before the mammographer starts the exam, tell them if:

- **You have any breast changes or concerns.**
- **You have breast implants.**
- **You have trouble standing without a cane or walker.**
- **You're breastfeeding or might be pregnant.**

When will I get my results? What if I need more tests?

You should get your results within about 10 days. If you don't, call and ask about them. If your doctor sees any areas of concern, they should call you in about a week. They might want to get more pictures or do other tests.

Getting called back after a screening mammogram doesn't mean you have breast cancer. Fewer than 1 in 10 women called back for more tests are found to have cancer. Often, it just means more mammograms or other tests need to be done to get a closer look at an area.

Getting called back happens more often after a first mammogram, or when there's no earlier mammogram to compare it to.

If the area looks suspicious after more tests, a doctor may use a thin needle to take out a small piece of tissue. This is called a **breast biopsy**. The tissue is sent to a lab and looked at under a microscope to check for cancer cells.

A biopsy is the only sure way to know if you have breast cancer. A mammogram alone can't confirm or rule out cancer. And even if you need a biopsy, remember that not all lumps or other changes are cancer.

What if I can't afford a mammogram?

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 to pay anything.

If you don't have insurance or your insurance doesn't cover the cost, there are free and low-cost programs available. Some clinics and offices also offer free or low-cost mammograms during National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October. Call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** to find a program near you.

Breast cancer screening helps save lives.

Regular breast cancer screening with mammograms can help find breast cancer early, when treatment is more likely to be successful. Encourage the women in your life to get regular mammograms.

This booklet gives you information about breast cancer screening and mammograms. It tells you things like:

- What a mammogram is
- Who should get a mammogram and when
- What to expect on the day of your mammogram
- What to expect after – including getting your results

To learn more about breast cancer screening, visit the American Cancer Society website at **cancer.org/breastcancer** or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

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