

What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is an X-ray image of the breast. Mammography is used to find early signs of breast cancer such as a mass or clusters of calcium (microcalcifications). It is the best screening tool used today to find breast cancer. It can find breast cancer early when it is small and the chance of survival is highest.

Who should have a mammogram?

Starting at age 40, women at average risk should get screened every year. Women under 40 with a family history of breast cancer or other concerns should talk with their doctor about what screening tests are right for them.

How accurate is a mammogram?

Like any screening test, mammograms are not perfect. It is possible for a woman to have breast cancer that doesn't show on a mammogram. It is also possible for something to show up on a mammogram that isn't breast cancer. This can lead to additional tests, like a diagnostic mammogram or other tests. Mammograms are better at finding breast cancer in older women than in younger women.

What is a diagnostic mammogram?

A diagnostic mammogram is used to follow up on an abnormal finding on a screening mammogram or clinical breast exam (CBE). This test provides two or more X-ray views of the breast.

What is the difference between film and digital mammography?

The images of the breast can be captured on film or stored directly on a computer (digital). Most imaging centers now use digital, and it may be better at finding breast cancer in some women. Women who have not gone through menopause, are under age 50 or have dense breast tissue may benefit from digital mammography.

Common questions about mammograms

Why would I want to find out if I have cancer?

Finding breast cancer early offers the most treatment options and greatest chance for survival.

What if my doctor hasn't brought up the idea of getting a mammogram?

You can bring up the subject yourself and ask about getting a mammogram.

Am I too old to get a mammogram?

Your chance of getting breast cancer increases as you get older. In general, women who are in good health and could benefit from treatment (if breast cancer were found) should get screened. If there is any question about whether you should continue getting mammograms, talk to your doctor.

Is it painful to get a mammogram?

A mammogram may be uncomfortable, but should not hurt. Each breast is pressed between two plates for a few seconds. This pressure is applied to get a good image. If you have concerns, talk to your provider about ways to ease discomfort (or anxiety) during a mammogram. Also, before the exam, let your technologist know of your concerns.

What if I cannot afford a mammogram?

As of September 2010, as part of the Affordable Care Act, all new health insurance plans are required to cover mammography (with no co-payment) for women ages 40 and older. This includes Medicare and Medicaid. There are also many free or low cost programs. Call our breast care helpline at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) or your state health department for information about low cost programs in your area.

How to get a mammogram in six easy steps

1. Choose a certified mammography center.

Your doctor may refer you to a center or you may choose one that is near you (such as a mobile mammography van). Wherever you go, be sure to check the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) website at www.fda.gov to be sure it is a certified center.

2. Pick a good time.

A mammogram may be uncomfortable if you have sensitive breasts. If you still get your period, plan to have your mammogram the week after your period, when your breasts are less tender.

3. Gather your information.

When you make your appointment, you will be asked about:

- Personal history of breast cancer,
- Family history of breast cancer,
- Current breast problems,
- Past breast surgery,
- The date(s) of your past mammogram(s), and
- The name and address of your doctor and any center where you've had a mammogram before.

During your visit, be sure you ask:

- How and when you will get the results, and
- When you need to come back.

4. Come prepared.

If you had a mammogram at a different center, bring the images with you. Or, bring the name and address of where you had it done. Before the screening, you will undress from the waist up. It is a good idea to wear a shirt you can remove easily. Don't use deodorants, antiperspirants, perfumes, powders or lotions on your breasts or underarm areas on the day of the exam. Ingredients in these products can show up on a mammogram and make it harder to read.

5. Get your results.

If you do not have your results within two weeks, call your doctor or the center. Don't assume your results are normal if you have not received a report.

6. Talk with your doctor about your results.

If your mammogram shows anything unusual, talk with your doctor about what to do next.

Remember....

- Tell the technologist if you have noticed a change in your breast.
- Have a CBE at least every three years starting at age 20 and every year starting at age 40. A CBE is a physical exam done by a health care provider to check the look and feel of the breasts and underarms for any changes (such as lumps). For women 40 and older, CBE combined with mammography is more accurate than either screening test used alone.
- Know how your breasts normally look and feel.
- Tell your provider if you notice a change even if you have had a recent mammogram that didn't show a problem. Sometimes cancers don't show up on mammograms, but can be felt.

Resources

Susan G. Komen®

1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)

www.komen.org

American College of Radiology (ACR)

1-800-227-5463

www.acr.org

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332)

www.fda.gov

National Cancer Institute

1-800-4-CANCER

www.cancer.gov

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Detection
- Breast Density
- Imaging Methods Used to Find Breast Cancer
- When You Discover a Lump or Change

The above list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.