

Biopsy basics

You may need a test called a biopsy, if you have:

- A breast lump or other breast change
- An abnormal finding on your mammogram

The samples of cells or tissue from the breast are viewed under a microscope for signs of cancer. A biopsy should not hurt because a local anesthetic (medicine that blocks pain in the area) is used.

There are two main types of biopsies: *needle* and *surgical*. The type you will have depend on the nature and location of the breast problem. Your doctor will decide which type of biopsy you need. If you need a biopsy, don't panic.

Most women who have a biopsy do not have breast cancer. Even so, you may want to bring a friend or family member for support and to drive you home.



Needle biopsy

A needle biopsy is often done first because it is fast, simple and accurate. If your doctor cannot feel the lump, special equipment is used to guide the needle to the area.

Fine needle aspiration (also known as FNA or fine needle biopsy) — A thin needle is used to remove cells from the breast lump. It can be done in an outpatient setting and only takes a few minutes.

Core needle biopsy — A thin, hollow needle is used to remove a small amount of tissue from the breast. It can be used on both suspicious areas that can be felt and those that can only be seen on a mammogram or other tests. The skin is nicked with a scalpel so the needle can enter. This type of needle biopsy is done with local anesthetic in an outpatient setting.

Vacuum assisted biopsy — A thicker, hollow needle removes core samples of tissue with a single insertion of a vacuum assisted probe. This type of needle biopsy may be done with the help of stereotactic mammography or ultrasound imaging. It is done under a local anesthetic in an outpatient setting.

Surgical biopsy

A surgical biopsy removes the entire lump. It is done in a hospital or outpatient setting with local anesthesia and sedation (asleep). Most women go home the same day.

Excisional biopsy — The entire lump plus some normal tissue around it are removed. This is the most common type of surgical biopsy. It is also the most accurate way to diagnose breast cancer. Although the main purpose is to diagnose cancer, an excisional biopsy may be the only surgery needed of the breast if breast cancer is found.

Types of biopsy	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>needle biopsy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fine needle • core needle • vacuum assisted breast biopsy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simple procedure — can be done in an outpatient setting and may use mammographic or ultrasound guidance • accurate • quicker than surgical biopsy • local anesthetic is used to prevent pain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surgical biopsy may still be needed • does not remove all of the lump • if needle misses the tumor, the biopsy will show cancer is not present when in fact it is (false negative result) which could delay diagnosis (not common) • <i>fine needle only</i>: requires cytopathologist to review the results • <i>fine needle only</i>: cannot fully distinguish non-invasive from invasive cancer
<p>surgical biopsy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • excisional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • takes about an hour • more accurate than needle biopsy • provides more information for treatment plan • may remove entire lump • might be the only surgery needed of the breast if breast cancer is found 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surgery • possible side effects such as infection or blood collection under the skin, scarring and changes in the breast shape • removing tissue can change the look and feel of the breast

Questions to ask your doctor

You should talk openly and honestly with your doctor to make sure all of your questions are answered. To help you get started, Susan G. Komen® has series of 17 *Questions to Ask the Doctor* inserts on many breast cancer topics including Biopsy. Some examples of questions include:

- What type of biopsy will I have? Why do you prefer this method?
- How much of the lump will be removed?

- How long will the biopsy take? Can I go home the same day?
- What side effects should I report to you?
- How soon will I know the results of the biopsy?
- How can I get a copy of the pathology report?
- If I have cancer, who will talk with me about my treatment options?

These questions will help your doctor understand and address your concerns. You can download and print any of these cards to take to your next appointment at www.komen.org/questions

Resources

Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Detection
- Breast Cancer Surgery
- Mammography
- Prognostic Factors
- Types of Breast Cancer Tumors
- When the Diagnosis is Cancer — An Overview

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.