

What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is an X-ray image of the breast. Mammography is used to find early signs of breast cancer. 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. A diagnostic mammogram is used to help diagnose breast cancer and other breast conditions.

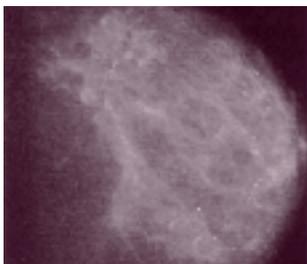
Starting at age 40, women at average risk should get screened every year. Women under 40 with a family history of breast cancer or other concerns should discuss with their doctor what screening tests are right for them.

How can a mammogram find breast cancer?

Mammogram images are stored on film or on a computer (digital). A radiologist looks at the image for signs of breast cancer or other breast changes. These changes may be small and hard to see, but the images can be compared from year to year to see if there have been any changes.

Mammograms are very accurate, but they are not perfect. That is why it is good to also have a clinical breast exam (CBE). 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). Women should get a CBE at least every 3 years starting at age 20 and every year starting at age 40. For women 40 and older, CBE combined with mammography is more accurate than either screening test used alone.

It is also important to know how your breasts normally look and feel. If you notice any change, see your provider.



A mammogram without signs of cancer.



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?
Bring up the subject yourself to see if you should get a mammogram. Ask for a referral.

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 provider.

Is it painful to get a mammogram?
Each breast is pressed between two plates to get a good X-ray image. Sometimes, the pressure is uncomfortable, but it only lasts a few seconds. It should not hurt. Tell the technologist if you feel discomfort. Taking acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) about an hour before the exam may help. If you have concerns, talk to your provider about other ways to ease discomfort (or anxiety) during a mammogram. And, before the exam, let your technologist know your concerns.

What if I cannot afford a mammogram?
As of September 23, 2010, as part of the Affordable Care Act (health care reform), 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 department of health 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. Or go to a mobile mammography van. Wherever you go, be sure to check the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) website at www.fda.gov for a list of certified centers.

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.

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.

If you had a mammogram before at a different center, bring your past mammograms with you. Or, bring the name and address of where you had it before.

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.

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
- Breast Imaging Methods
- 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.