

# What is Breast Cancer Screening?

Breast cancer screenings check a woman's breasts for cancer before there are signs or symptoms of the disease. All women need to discuss with their health care provider the best screening options for them.

## Breast cancer screening recommendations

The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) is an organization made up of doctors and disease experts who look at research on the best way to prevent diseases. They make recommendations on how doctors can help patients avoid diseases or find them early.

The USPSTF recommends that women who are 50 to 74 years old and are at average risk for breast cancer get a mammogram every two years. Women who are 40 to 49 years old should talk to their doctor or other health care professional about when to start and how often to get a mammogram. Women should weigh the benefits and risks of screening tests when deciding whether to begin getting mammograms before age 50.

## Where can I go to get screened?

You can get screened for breast cancer at a clinic, hospital, or doctor's office. If you want to be screened for breast cancer, call your doctor's office. They can help you schedule an appointment.

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 (like a co-pay, deductible, or co-insurance).

## Breast cancer screening tests

- Mammogram  
A mammogram is an X-ray of the breast. For many women, mammograms are the best way to find breast cancer early, when it is easier to treat and before it is big enough to feel or cause symptoms. Having regular mammograms can lower the risk of dying from breast cancer. At this time, a mammogram is the best way to find breast cancer for most women.
- Breast Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)  
A breast MRI uses magnets and radio waves to take pictures of the breast. MRI is used along with mammograms to screen women who are at high risk for getting breast cancer. Because breast MRIs may appear abnormal even when there is no cancer, they are not used for women at average risk.

## Other exams

- Clinical breast exam  
A clinical breast exam is an examination by a doctor or nurse, who uses his or her hands to feel for lumps or other changes.
- Breast self-awareness  
Being familiar with how your breasts look and feel can help you notice symptoms such as lumps, pain, or changes in size that may be of concern. These could include changes found during a breast self-exam. You should report any changes that you notice to your doctor or health care provider.

Having a clinical breast exam or doing a breast self-exam has not been found to lower the risk of dying from breast cancer. Some women might still be more comfortable doing them to keep track of how their breast look and feel.



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## Benefits and risks of screening

Every screening test has benefits and risks, which is why it is important to talk to your doctor before getting any screening test, like a mammogram.

- Benefits of screening  
The benefit of screening is finding cancer early, when it is easier to treat.
- Risks of screening
  - False positive test results. False positive test results happen when a doctor sees something that looks like cancer but is not. This can lead to more tests. More tests can be expensive, invasive, time-consuming, and may cause anxiety.
  - Overdiagnosis. Overdiagnosis happens when doctors find a cancer that would not have gone on to cause symptoms or problems, or even may go away on its own.
  - Overtreatment. Overtreatment comes with overdiagnosis. It can include treatments recommended for breast cancer, such as surgery or radiation therapy. These can cause unnecessary and unwanted side effects.
  - Pain. Some pain may occur during the procedure.
  - Radiation exposure. The mammogram test itself exposes one to radiation. While the amount of radiation in a mammogram is small, there may be risks with having repeated X-rays.
  - False negative test results. Mammograms may also miss some cancers. False negative tests may delay finding a cancer and getting treatment.

Although breast cancer screening cannot prevent breast cancer, it can help find breast cancer early, when it is easier to treat. Talk to your doctor about which breast cancer screening tests are right for you, and when you should have them.

*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

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