

## What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is an X-ray image of the breast. It can find breast cancer in a person who doesn't have any **warning signs or symptoms**, even when the breast cancer is too small to feel. This is called a **screening mammogram**. It's the best screening test we have today to find breast cancer in most women.

A mammogram can also be used as a follow-up test known as a **diagnostic mammogram**. It may be done after a change is found:

- On a screening mammogram.
- During a clinical breast exam.
- By you or your partner.

While a diagnostic mammogram can't diagnose breast cancer, it can help rule it out. Other imaging tests may be done after a diagnostic mammogram if cancer can't be ruled out. If the findings suggest breast cancer, a **biopsy** will be needed to diagnose (or rule out) breast cancer.

## Digital breast tomosynthesis (DBT, tomo, 3D mammography)

Today, most women have mammography with digital breast tomosynthesis (DBT). DBT can also be called "tomo" or 3-dimensional (3D) mammography. DBT takes multiple 2-dimensional (2D) digital images of the breast. Computer software combines the 2D images to create a 3D image. A trained radiologist reads the mammogram by studying the images to look for signs of breast cancer.

When scheduling your mammography appointment, check if your insurance covers DBT.

## What to expect on the day of the mammogram

A screening mammogram takes about 15 minutes.

- Wear a shirt you can remove easily since you'll undress from the waist up before the mammogram.
- Don't use deodorant, antiperspirants, perfume, powders or lotion on your breasts and underarm areas on the exam day. Ingredients in these products can appear on a mammogram, making it harder to read.



## Findings on a mammogram

A mammogram may show:

- No signs of breast cancer.
- A **benign (not cancer) condition** or other change that does not suggest cancer.
- An **abnormal finding** that needs follow-up tests to rule out cancer.

You should receive your results within 2 weeks. If you haven't received them by then, call your doctor or the mammography center.

## Breast density on a mammogram

**Breast density** is a measure used to describe mammogram images, it's not how the breasts feel. Breasts are made up of breast tissue and fat, with connective tissue helping to hold everything in place. Breast density compares the amount of breast tissue to the amount of fat seen on a mammogram. Breast tissue is denser than fat, which can make it hard for a radiologist to read a mammogram.

- High breast density = More breast tissue than fat.
- Low breast density = More fat than breast tissue.

Having dense breasts is a risk factor for breast cancer. It's common, too; it occurs in about 40-50% of women ages 40-74.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires all mammography centers in the U.S. to notify women about their breast density after having a mammogram.

If you have any concerns about your breast density or your risk of breast cancer, talk with your doctor.

This fact sheet is intended to be a brief overview. For more information, visit [komen.org](https://www.komen.org) or call Susan G. Komen's Breast Care Helpline at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. ET, or email at [helpline@komen.org](mailto:helpline@komen.org). Se habla español.

## Resources

### Susan G. Komen®

1-877 GO KOMEN  
(1-877-465-6636)  
[komen.org](http://komen.org)

## Related educational resources:

- [Breast Self-Awareness Messages](#)
- [Benign Breast Conditions](#)
- [Breast Density](#)
- [Breast Density – Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#)
- [Breast Cancer Screening & Follow-Up Tests](#)
- [If You Find a Breast Lump or Change](#)
- [Screening Mammograms - Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#)
- [What is Breast Cancer?](#)



## Questions & answers about mammography

### When should I get a screening mammogram?

Talk with your doctor about when and how often to get a screening mammogram. Susan G. Komen® believes all women should have access to regular screening mammograms when they and their doctor decide it's best, based on their risk of breast cancer.

### Are mammograms painful?

You may feel some pressure, but getting a mammogram shouldn't hurt. Tell the technologist if you have any concerns or if you feel any discomfort during the test.

### Is the radiation from a mammogram harmful?

You're exposed to a small amount of radiation during a mammogram. Although this exposure might increase the risk of breast cancer over time, this increase is very small. Studies show the benefits of mammography outweigh this risk, especially for women ages 50 and older.

### What should I do if I'm told I have dense breasts?

There are no special screening recommendations for women with dense breasts. However, your doctor may suggest other types of breast imaging in addition to regular mammograms, depending on your risk.

### What if I can't afford a mammogram?

The Affordable Care Act requires most health insurance plans to cover screening mammograms with no co-payment, every 2 years for women 50 and older, and as recommended by a health care provider for women 40-49. This includes Medicare and Medicaid. Call the Komen Patient Care Center at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) or email [helpline@komen.org](mailto:helpline@komen.org) for information about low-cost programs in your area.

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