



Cleveland Clinic

Mammography 101

If you're confused about when to have a mammogram and what kind you should have, you're not alone. Recent debate about screening mammography guidelines has many women questioning the value of this important tool.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BREAST CANCER SCREENING?

Research continually has shown that early detection is the best defense against breast cancer. Breast cancer is one of the most treatable, curable cancers when caught early.

Cleveland Clinic recommends annual screening mammograms beginning at age 40 for most women. Depending on your personal risk level and family history, you may need to begin screening even earlier. Ask your doctor to be sure.

WHICH TYPE OF MAMMOGRAM DO I NEED?

There are two types of mammography: screening and diagnostic.

Screening mammography is used to look for breast changes in women who do not have any sign of breast cancer. This is what you'll receive in conjunction with your routine yearly exam.

Diagnostic mammography is used to evaluate changes in the breast found during a screening mammogram.

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Your doctor will determine your need for a diagnostic mammogram based on findings from your screening mammogram. Diagnostic mammograms also are used to check for breast cancer after a mass/lump or other sign of the disease has been found, such as nipple discharge, thickening or changes in the size or shape of the breast.

WHAT KIND OF MAMMOGRAPHY IS RECOMMENDED FOR BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS?

Most breast cancer survivors return to routine screening mammography within one to three years after cancer treatment unless they are experiencing a breast problem. Your doctor will advise you on the appropriate type of mammogram for your specific care.

HOW IS DIGITAL MAMMOGRAPHY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER MAMMOGRAMS?

Technology has raised the standards of imaging quality. Several Cleveland Clinic locations use breast imaging equipment that is digital, rather than traditional mammography equipment. Digital mammography (DM) creates high-resolution images that are exceptionally clear and detailed. Digital mammography also allows for more digital manipulation of a breast X-ray exam than is possible with film mammography. This may allow the radiologist to identify and diagnose extremely small masses/lumps and tiny deposits of calcium (calcification). Younger women with dense breast tissue particularly benefit from use of this technology.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT IF MY MAMMOGRAM REVEALS AN IRREGULARITY?

If a mammogram looks suspicious, further imaging may be done. Many patients feel anxious when they learn that their mammogram is irregular. However, abnormal findings are not necessarily breast cancer. They often point to cysts, benign (non cancerous) masses/lumps or calcification. If additional tests are needed in order for the radiologist to make a diagnosis, breast ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or both may be performed.

WHAT IS A BREAST ULTRASOUND?

Ultrasonography, or ultrasound, uses high-frequency sound waves that transform recorded echoes into video or photographic images. There is no radiation involved. Ultrasound may be used to determine whether a breast lump is a cyst (containing fluid) or a solid mass. In diagnosing breast disease, ultrasound may be used alone or with other procedures.

WHAT IS A BREAST MRI?

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a test that produces very clear images of the human body without the use of X-rays. Breast MRI may be used to distinguish between benign and malignant growths, which can reduce the need for breast biopsies. It is used to assess abnormal areas that are seen on a mammogram or are felt after breast surgery or radiation therapy. It can be used after breast cancer is diagnosed to determine the extent of the tumor in the breast.

Breast MRI also is sometimes useful in imaging dense breast tissue, which is often found in younger women, and in viewing breast abnormalities that can be felt but are not visible with conventional mammography or ultrasound. Cleveland Clinic has the most up-to-date MRI technology, offering improved patient comfort and more accurate views.

ARE THERE ANY ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BREAST CANCER SCREENING?

Although there has been some debate regarding the effectiveness of monthly self-exams, most women do find breast lumps themselves. Examine your breasts each month after age 20. You will become familiar with the contours and feel of your breasts and will be more alert to changes. The best time to examine your breasts is after your menstrual cycle is finished.

Have your breasts examined by a healthcare provider at least once every three years after age 20, and every year after age 40. Clinical breast exams can detect lumps that may not be detected by mammogram.

If your physician prescribes a mammogram, you can count on Cleveland Clinic's Comprehensive Breast Cancer Program team to provide the highest-quality care for screening, diagnosis and treatment of breast disease. Same-day appointments are available. Call today: **216.444.3024** or **800.223.2273**. Or visit us online at clevelandclinic.org/breast.