

## Screening

Screening for breast cancer before there are symptoms can be important. Screening can help doctors find and treat cancer early. Treatment is more likely to work well when cancer is found early.

Your doctor may suggest the following screening tests for breast cancer:

- Screening mammogram
- Clinical breast exam
- Breast self-exam

You should ask your doctor about when to start and how often to check for breast cancer.

### Screening Mammogram

To find breast cancer early, NCI recommends that:

- Women in their 40s and older should have mammograms every 1 to 2 years. A mammogram is a picture of the breast made with x-rays.
- Women who are younger than 40 and have risk factors for breast cancer should ask their health care provider whether to have mammograms and how often to have them.

Mammograms can often show a breast lump before it can be felt. They also can show a cluster of tiny specks of calcium. These specks are called microcalcifications. Lumps or specks can be from cancer, precancerous cells, or other conditions. Further tests are needed to find out if abnormal cells are present.

If an abnormal area shows up on your mammogram, you may need to have more x-rays. You also may need a biopsy. A biopsy is the only way to tell for sure if cancer is present. (The "Diagnosis" section has more information on biopsy.)

Mammograms are the best tool doctors have to find breast cancer early. However, mammograms are not perfect:

- A mammogram may miss some cancers. (The result is called a "false negative.")
- A mammogram may show things that turn out not to be cancer. (The result is called a "false positive.")
- Some fast-growing tumors may grow large or spread to other parts of the body before a mammogram detects them.

Mammograms (as well as dental x-rays, and other routine x-rays) use very small doses of radiation. The risk of any harm is very slight, but repeated x-rays could cause problems. The benefits nearly always outweigh the risk. You should talk with your health care provider about the need for each x-ray. You should also ask for shields to protect parts of your body that are not in the picture.

### Clinical Breast Exam

During a clinical breast exam, your health care provider checks your breasts. You may be asked to raise your arms over your head, let them hang by your sides, or press your hands against your hips.

Your health care provider looks for differences in size or shape between your breasts. The skin of your breasts is checked for a rash, dimpling, or other abnormal signs. Your nipples may be squeezed to check for fluid.

Using the pads of the fingers to feel for lumps, your health care provider checks your entire breast, underarm, and collarbone area. A lump is generally the size of a pea before anyone can feel it. The exam is done on one side, then the other. Your health care provider checks the lymph nodes near the breast to see if they are enlarged.

A thorough clinical breast exam may take about 10 minutes.

## **Breast Self-Exam**

You may perform monthly breast self-exams to check for any changes in your breasts. It is important to remember that changes can occur because of aging, your *menstrual cycle*, pregnancy, menopause, or taking birth control pills or other *hormones*. It is normal for breasts to feel a little lumpy and uneven. Also, it is common for your breasts to be swollen and tender right before or during your menstrual period.

You should contact your health care provider if you notice any unusual changes in your breasts.

Breast self-exams cannot replace regular screening mammograms and clinical breast exams. Studies have not shown that breast self-exams alone reduce the number of deaths from breast cancer.

You may want to ask the doctor the following questions about screening:

- Which tests do you recommend for me? Why?
- Do the tests hurt? Are there any risks?
- How much do mammograms cost? Will my health insurance pay for them?
- How soon after the mammogram will I learn the results?
- If the results show a problem, how will you learn if I have cancer?