

## What Women Should Know About Mammograms

Mammograms are x-rays of the breast that can help doctors find cancer early, when the cancer is small and easier to treat than more advanced cancer. That's useful because early treatment can sometimes lower the chances that breast cancer will return or spread to other parts of the body.

Many organizations recommend that women have mammograms every 1 to 2 years starting at age 40. There is good evidence that women aged 50 and older can lower their chance of dying from breast cancer by having regular mammograms. Still, having regular mammograms can have some downsides, too.

If your doctor recommends a mammogram, learn what the test can and cannot do. Remember, too, that you have a choice about whether to have a mammogram.

### Mammograms Are Not Perfect

You may be surprised to learn that mammograms are not perfect. The tests can give "false positives," meaning that they show something that looks abnormal but turns out not to be cancer. They sometimes also give "false negatives," meaning that they miss cancer that is there.

What happens after a positive mammogram? Women who have a positive mammogram usually have a biopsy or other additional tests, and sometimes even surgery, before they find out whether they have cancer. Most women who have a positive mammogram do not have cancer.

If an abnormal mammogram turns out to be a false positive, the additional tests and procedures that followed were unnecessary. Also, waiting for the results of additional tests after a suspicious mammogram may have caused unnecessary worry and anxiety.

### Age Matters

False positives and false negatives are both more common among younger women than they are among older women. The breasts of younger women tend to be denser than the breasts of older women, and that can make mammograms harder to read. Breast cancer is also less common among younger women than it is among older women, and the risk gradually increases as a woman gets older.

At a certain age, the benefits of regular mammograms begin to balance out their possible downsides. That age is probably different for each woman. That's why some organizations say that each woman and her doctor should decide when to start regular mammograms based on her risk of breast cancer and how she feels about the benefits and harms of the tests.

If you are younger than 50, talk to your doctor about the pros and cons of having regular mammograms. If you have a family history of breast cancer, you may be at increased risk, and you may prefer to start having regular mammograms sooner rather than later. On the other hand, if you have no risk factors for breast cancer, you may feel you'd rather wait until you turn 50.

### A Health Coach Can Help

If you have questions about breast cancer screening, call a Health Coach. Health Coaches are specially trained healthcare professionals, such as nurses, dietitians, and respiratory therapists. They are available by phone, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, at no charge to you.

To talk to a Health Coach, call [1-800-658-2750](tel:1-800-658-2750). You can also get information online at [www.thedialogcenter.com/bcbsnd](http://www.thedialogcenter.com/bcbsnd).