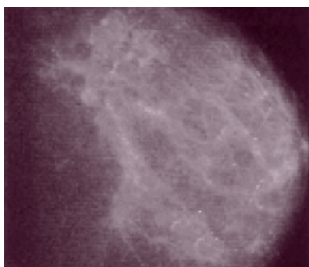


What is a mammogram?

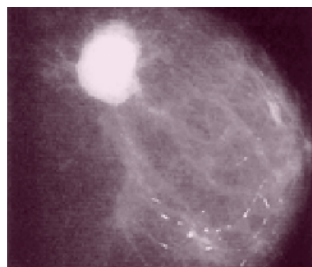
A mammogram is the best screening tool used today to find breast cancer early. A mammogram is an X-ray picture of the breast. A mammogram can find cancer when it is small and easier to treat. Health and medical experts recommend that all women get a screening mammogram every year starting at age 40 (and perhaps earlier if you have a family history of breast cancer). It is also important to have a clinical breast exam every 3 years starting at 20 and every year starting at 40. If you have a breast problem, a mammogram can also be used to help diagnose it.

A mammogram is done in an outpatient facility like your doctor's office, a hospital clinic or a mobile van. The picture is taken by a technologist. Mammogram images can be stored on film (standard mammography) or to a computer (digital mammography). The X-ray machine uses very little radiation. A radiologist will look at the X-ray picture for signs of breast cancer or other breast changes. These changes may be small and hard to see, so it is best to have a mammogram every year. That way, a radiologist can compare your X-rays from year to year to see if there have been any changes.

Mammograms are very accurate, but they are not perfect. They can find a lump much smaller than you or your doctor can feel. But sometimes they can miss cancer. That is why it is important to also get a clinical breast exam in addition to having mammograms. It is also important to be aware of any changes in the look or feel of your breasts between screenings. (For step-by-step BSE instructions, go to www.komen.org/bse.)



This is what a normal mammogram looks like.



Cancer appears on a mammogram as a white spot.

Common questions about mammograms

Why would I want to find out if I have cancer?

Finding cancer early makes it easier to treat, often without losing a breast. A mammogram can find cancer before you notice any problems in your breast.

What if my doctor never mentioned it?

Bring up the subject yourself, ask for a referral to get a mammogram or contact a local facility directly.

Am I too old to get a mammogram?

No, you may be surprised to learn that your chance of getting breast cancer increases as you get older. That makes it even more important to get a mammogram.

Is it painful?

To get a good picture, the technologist needs to flatten the breast. You may feel uncomfortable, but it only lasts a few minutes.

What if I cannot afford a mammogram?

If you have insurance, most plans cover it. Medicare also pays for mammograms. There are many free or low cost programs. Call the Komen breast care helpline (1-877 GO KOMEN or 1-877-465-6636) or your state department of health for information about low cost programs in your area.

How to get a mammogram in six easy steps

1. Choose a certified facility.

Your doctor may refer you to a mammography facility or you may choose one that is convenient for you, such as a mobile mammography van. Wherever you go, be sure to look for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) certificate and accreditation by the American College of Radiology (ACR). These should be displayed. Check the expiration date to assure that the facility is certified.

2. Pick a good time.

A mammogram may be uncomfortable if you have sensitive breasts. If you are still menstruating, plan to have your mammogram the week after your period, when your breasts are less tender.

3. Gather your information.

When you make your appointment, you will be asked about:

- personal history of breast cancer
- family history of breast cancer
- current breast problems
- past breast surgery
- the date(s) of your past mammogram(s)
- the name and address of your doctor and any facility where you've had a mammogram before

During your visit, be sure you ask about:

- how and when you will get the results
- when you need to come back

4. Know what to expect.

You will stand in front of a special machine. The technologist will place your breast on a platform for pictures in at least two views. She will use a clear plastic plate to press your breast while the pictures are taken. This will not harm your breast. In fact, flattening it reduces the amount of X-rays needed. Although it may be uncomfortable, it should not hurt. Be sure to tell the technologist if the pressure becomes painful.

5. Come prepared.

Wear a shirt that you can take off easily. Don't use deodorant, talcum powder or lotion on your underarms or breasts as these may affect the image quality. If you have had a mammogram before at a different facility, obtain and bring your past X-rays with you. If you cannot bring your past X-rays with you, provide the name and address of the facility where X-rays were taken.

6. Get your results.

If you do not have your results within 2 weeks, call your doctor or the mammography facility. Don't assume your results are normal if you have not gotten them. If your mammogram shows anything unusual, talk with your doctor about what to do next.

Resources

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

American College of Radiology (ACR)
1-800-227-5463
www.acr.org

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332)
www.fda.gov

National Cancer Institute
1-800-4-CANCER
www.cancer.gov

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Detection
- Breast Imaging Methods
- When You Discover a Lump