



# Mammogram FAQs: Here's what to expect

The exam itself may not feel so great, but it sure feels good to know you're on top of your breast health.

Mammography uses X-rays to make images of the breast (called mammograms). Mammography can find cancers early, when they're small and the chances of survival are highest. That's why it's often used as a screening test. It can also be used as [a follow-up test](#) (called a diagnostic mammogram) if you or your doctor [notice a change](#) in your breast or if there's something unusual on your screening mammogram.

If it's time for you to get a screening mammogram, you may want to ask around to see if a friend or relative needs one too. It might be nice to go together. Whether you go solo or with company, here's what to expect.

## What to expect at your appointment

If you've never had a mammogram before, knowing what to expect can smooth the process and ease anxiety. Start by talking to your doctor about any questions you have. You can also talk to your technologist (the person who does the mammogram) about any concerns when you're at the appointment. If you've noticed a change in your breast or underarm area—even if you're not sure if it's anything to worry about—mention it to your doctor. If you notice a change in the time between seeing your doctor and getting your mammogram, tell the technologist before they do the mammogram.

Here are some things it's good to know beforehand.

- If you have a regular cycle, you may want to schedule your appointment in the week after an upcoming period. Your breasts should be less tender at that time, and it'll be easy to remember the date of your last period if they ask for it.
- If you've had a mammogram before and are going to a new center, it's best to arrange to transfer previous results before your appointment or bring them with you when you go to your exam. You'll have to sign a release to get the results, which may be shared by film, CD or electronically. Some centers have nurse navigators who can help you with the transfer.
- It's a good idea to keep a record of every mammogram for future reference. Make sure to note the name and address of the center and the date you had the mammogram done.
- The mammography center will likely ask you for the name of your doctor so they can share your results in case any follow-up is recommended.

- You can expect a screening mammogram to take about 15 minutes.
- To get the mammogram you'll need to undress from the waist up, so it's a good idea to wear a shirt you can remove easily.
- Avoid using deodorants, antiperspirants, perfumes, powders or lotions on your breasts and underarm areas on the day of the exam. Ingredients in these products can show up on a mammogram and make it harder to read. (If you forget and wear one of these products, many mammography centers will give you wipes so you can remove it before the test.)
- During the exam, each breast is pressed between two plates and an X-ray image is made. Two views of each breast are taken, one from top to bottom and the other from side to side.
- Sometimes, the pressure from the plates can be uncomfortable, but it only lasts for a few seconds. If you have concerns, talk with your doctor about taking acetaminophen (eg. Tylenol) or ibuprofen (eg. Advil, Motrin) about an hour before the exam. You can also talk to the technologist before your exam if you're worried about pain. The technologist can work with you to make you as comfortable as possible while still getting a good quality image.

## When can you expect your results?

How long it takes to get your results may depend on whether you're having a screening or diagnostic mammogram. You can usually expect the results of a screening mammogram within two weeks. If you're having a mammogram as a follow-up test, you may get the results before you leave the appointment.

You can ask your doctor or your technologist how long it will take to get results, then keep an eye out for them. If you don't get your results within 2 weeks, be sure to follow up by contacting your doctor or the mammography center.

## FAQs about mammograms

### 1. What do mammograms show?

Like other X-ray images, mammograms appear in shades of black, gray and white, depending on how dense the tissue is.

- Mammograms show abnormalities in the breast that may or may not be cancer. Dense breast tissue and fatty breast tissue look different on a mammogram. Very dense tissue, like bone, shows up white, while fat looks dark gray. Breast cancer and some benign (not cancerous) breast conditions are denser than fat and appear a lighter shade of gray or white on a mammogram.
- Since most mammograms today are digital, the images can be lightened or darkened, and certain sections can be enlarged and looked at more closely.
- If something unusual shows up on your screening mammogram, the next step will be follow-up testing to see if it's cancerous or benign.

## 2. Does it hurt to get a mammogram?

Some people find getting mammograms uncomfortable; others less so. While the X-ray is being taken, you may feel some pressure from the two plates, but any discomfort should only last a few seconds. If you're still having your period, it may be more comfortable to make your appointment for just after your period when your breasts are least tender.

## 3. When and how often should I get mammograms?

First things first: if you ever [notice a change in your breast](#), that is the right time to talk to your doctor about getting a mammogram. It doesn't matter how young you are, how recently you had a mammogram, or how soon your scheduled screening mammogram is coming up. Don't wait!

When it comes to regular screening mammograms, most major health organizations recommend them, but there's still debate about:

- how much benefit there is from mammography, especially in younger women;
- when to begin mammography; and
- how often to get a mammogram

In other words, [there isn't a totally straightforward answer to this question](#). How often you get screened and [what screening methods](#) are used also depends on your age, risk level and other personal factors. A good way to start figuring out what screening schedule is right for you is to talk to your doctor about your personal risk. If you feel like the screening schedule your doctor suggests isn't soon enough or often enough, voice your concerns, get a second opinion or get a new doctor.

## 4. Who's involved in getting a mammogram?

There are a few different medical professionals involved in the mammogram process.

- Your OB/GYN, nurse practitioner, or other primary care provider should be able to offer at least basic information about mammograms and help you figure out when to start getting them and how frequently.
- A mammography technologist positions your breast to take the X-ray images.
- A radiologist, a doctor with special training, reads the mammograms to look for signs of breast cancer.

## 5. Where can you get a mammogram?

Mammograms can be done in any of the following:

- Radiology and imaging centers
- Mammography clinics
- Hospital radiology departments
- Mobile vans
- Some physicians' offices

If you have health insurance, check with your insurance provider to find out where to get your mammogram done to make sure it's covered. You should also confirm that the place where you get your mammogram is FDA certified. ([You can also search the FDA's database](#) to find a certified center.) If you don't have insurance, there are still lots of ways to [find low-cost or free mammograms](#).

## 6. What's the difference between 2D and 3D mammograms?

Standard mammograms are considered two-dimensional, or 2D. 3D mammograms are enhanced images created from 2D images. Researchers are still studying whether 3D is better than 2D at screening for breast cancer. Here are some ways 3D and 2D mammograms compare:

- A 3D mammography machine creates both 2D and 3D mammograms. You stay in one place while all the images are taken on the same machine.
- A 3D mammogram takes a few seconds longer than a 2D mammogram because more images are taken, but you likely won't even notice a difference.
- Radiologists need special training to read 3D images.
- Depending on the method, 3D mammography gives the same or slightly more radiation than 2D mammography. This amount is still within FDA guidelines.
- Your insurance should definitely cover 2D screening mammograms, and there's a good chance it also covers 3D mammograms. Still, it's best to confirm with your insurance provider and the imaging center before going for 3D.

## 7. Can the radiation from a mammogram harm me?

You are exposed to a small amount of radiation when you get a mammogram. While this exposure can increase the risk of breast cancer over time, the increase is so small that studies [show the benefits outweigh the risks](#) (especially for women who are 50 and older).

## 8. How can I get a mammogram if I have a physical disability?

If you have a physical disability, you may have to call around to find a mammography center that meets your needs. Many centers (especially mobile ones) may not be designed for patients with physical limitations.

Your doctor may be able to help find a center that meets your needs. The CDC also has [a tip sheet for breast cancer screening for women with disabilities](#). If you notice that your area doesn't have good access to mammography for people with disabilities, let your local medical centers know. This may help increase access for you and others.



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