

What is screening?

Screening is a test used to find a condition (such as breast cancer) in a person without symptoms.

Breast cancer screening tests

Mammogram — Mammography is the best screening tool used today to find breast cancer. It uses X-rays to create an image of the breast, called a mammogram. Mammogram images can be stored on film or on a computer. A mammogram can find breast cancer early when it is small and the chances of survival are highest. Women age 40 and older at average risk, should have a mammogram every year.

Clinical breast exam (CBE) — A CBE is done by a health care provider who checks your breasts and underarm areas for any lumps or changes. It should be part of your regular medical checkup. If it is not, ask for it. If you are 40 or older, have your mammogram close to the time of your CBE. For women ages 20-39, have a CBE at least every three years.

For women 40 and older, CBE combined with mammography is more accurate than either screening test used alone.

Early detection

Even if you feel healthy now, just being a woman and getting older puts you at risk for breast cancer. Finding breast cancer early may save your life.

Know what is normal for you

The signs of breast cancer are not the same for all women. It is important to know how your breasts normally look and feel. Many women find their breasts feel lumpy. Breast tissue naturally has a bumpy texture that varies from one woman to another. For some women, the lumpiness is more obvious than for others. In most cases, this is no cause to worry. If the lumpiness can be felt throughout the breast and feels like your other breast, it is likely just normal breast tissue.

Lumps that feel harder or different from the rest of the breast tissue (or the tissue of the other breast) or that feel like a change are a concern. If you feel or see any change in your breasts or underarms, see your health care provider.

Overall, mammography is the best breast cancer screening tool used today. It can find breast cancer at an early stage, before it can be felt. As new screening tools are developed, and we learn more about a person's own risk, we may learn who will likely benefit most from any given screening test. Today, there are specific screening guidelines for people at higher risk. Yet, only general guidelines for those at average risk. As we learn more, more guidelines for those within the "average risk" group may come about. Today, women should discuss their screening options with their health care providers.

Questions to ask

Talk with your health care provider about your risk of breast cancer. Ask which screening tests may be right for you.

Here are some questions you might want to ask:

1. When should I start getting mammograms?
2. *If you are 40-49 and your health care provider does not recommend a mammogram:* Would I benefit from getting a mammogram? What are the risks and benefits of mammography for me?
3. How often should I get a mammogram?
4. Where can I go to get a mammogram?
5. What if I cannot afford a mammogram?
6. How often do I need a clinical breast exam?
7. Am I at higher risk for getting breast cancer? Do I need other screening tests?
8. Does my mammogram show that I have dense breasts?

Resources

You can get information about mammograms and clinical breast exams by contacting the organizations listed below.

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

American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

National Cancer Institute's Cancer
Information Service
1-800-4-CANCER
www.cancer.gov

Signs you should not ignore

Be aware of any change in your breast or underarm area. If you notice any of the following signs, see your health care provider.

- Lump, hard knot or thickening inside the breast or underarm area
- Swelling, warmth, redness or darkening of the breast
- Change in the size or shape of the breast
- Dimpling or puckering of the skin
- Itchy, scaly sore or rash on the nipple
- Pulling in of your nipple or other parts of the breast
- Nipple discharge that starts suddenly
- New pain in one spot that does not go away

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Benign Breast Conditions
- Breast Cancer Facts
- Breast Density
- Mammography
- When You Discover a Lump or Change

The above list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.