



Cancer Screening Programmes

BREAST SCREENING

The Facts

CANCER RESEARCH UK



What is breast screening?

- Breast screening (mammography) is an x-ray examination of the breasts.
- Breast screening can show breast cancers at an early stage, when they are too small for you or your doctor to see or feel.
- A mammogram takes a few minutes and involves a tiny dose of radiation, so the risk to your health is very small.
- Your whole visit to the breast screening unit should take about half an hour.

Why do I need breast screening?

One in nine women will develop breast cancer at some time in their life. Breast cancer is more common in women over 50. Breast screening can help to find small changes in the breast before there are any other signs or symptoms. If changes are found at an early stage, there is a good chance of a successful recovery.

Should all women have breast screening?

We invite all women aged between 50 and 70 for breast screening every three years. From 2009, we will start to invite women in their late 40s and up to the age of 73 as well. It will take a few years before this extension to the screening programme happens everywhere in England.

Breast cancer risk rises as women get older. So even though women over the age of 70 are not automatically invited for breast screening (except in areas where the age extension has started), you are still encouraged to go for screening every three years. You can contact your local breast screening unit to make an appointment.

Whatever age you are, if you are ever worried about any breast problem, please contact your doctor who may refer you for a specialist opinion if necessary.

What is the NHS Breast Screening Programme?

The programme makes sure that if you are aged 50 to 70 we will invite you for breast screening. We will get your name from your NHS record. This record is made up from your doctor's list so it is important that your doctor always has your correct name and address.

In most parts of the country we will invite doctors' practices for screening in turn, once every three years. So you will not necessarily get your invitation in the year that you turn 50. As long as you are registered with a doctor, we will invite you for breast screening before your 53rd birthday. If you move and register with a new GP, the local screening centre will be informed and your records will be transferred.

From 2009, the programme will also be responsible for women who have been assessed by a specialist as being at high risk of breast cancer. Women at high risk are screened from an earlier age.

Where do I go for breast screening?

The screening centre may be in a hospital or clinic, or it may be in a mobile unit.

What exactly happens during breast screening?

When you arrive, feel free to ask any questions you have about breast screening.

When you have undressed and are ready and comfortable, a specialist female member of the screening staff will explain mammography to you and ask you a few questions. She will help position your breasts, one at a time, between two special plates and take the x-rays.

Mammography takes a few minutes and your breasts are only pressed between the two plates for a few seconds each. There is no evidence that this procedure harms the breast.

Do I have to undress?

Yes, you will be asked to undress completely down to your waist, so it is a good idea to wear a separate top instead of a dress.

Please do not use talcum powder or spray-on deodorant on the day you go for breast screening as this may show on the mammogram and give a false reading.

Does breast screening hurt?

Some women find mammography uncomfortable and some find it painful as the breasts have to be held firmly in position and pressed to take a good x-ray. If you do experience pain it usually only lasts for as long as the mammogram, although it may continue for some time in a small number of women.

When do I get my results?

When you have had the mammogram, the specialist female member of the screening staff will tell you how and approximately when you will get your results. Make sure you have received this information before you leave the unit.

What does it mean if I am called back?

Some women (about one in every 20 who are screened) are called back because the appearance of the x-ray suggests that more tests are needed. Most women will not have any problems and we will call them back again in three years' time as part of the routine screening process.

What if I need treatment?

If we call you back and you need treatment, a specialist team will look after you. They will make sure that you get a high quality of care and treatment at all times.

Breast cancer treatment is always being improved and reviewed. As part of this process, we may invite you to take part in a trial where we will compare the effects of different treatments. You do not have to take part in any trial that we offer you.

How reliable is breast screening?

Mammography is the most reliable way of detecting breast cancer early but, like other screening tests, it is not perfect. For example:

- some cancers are very difficult to see on the x-ray;
- some cancers, even though they are there, cannot be seen on the x-ray at all;
- the person reading the x-ray may miss the cancer (this will happen occasionally, no matter how experienced the reader is).

The screening programme is starting to change to using digital mammography instead of films. The process of taking the mammogram (x-ray) is the same.

Does breast screening prevent breast cancer?

No, breast screening only helps find breast cancer if it is already there. You should be aware of any changes in your breasts because breast cancer can develop at any time. Some women will develop breast cancer before their first mammogram or between mammograms.

There is a simple five-point breast awareness code that all women should remember.

- Know what is normal for you.
- Look at and feel your breasts.
- Know what changes to look for (lumps, pain, discharge from the nipple or anything else unusual).
- Tell your doctor about any changes immediately.
- Go for breast screening every three years if you are over 50.

There are many reasons for changes in the breast. Most of them are harmless but you should get any change checked as there is a small chance that it could be the first sign of cancer.

Breast awareness and regular mammograms together offer you the best chance of finding breast cancer early.

What happens to my x-rays once they have been read?

The breast screening unit will keep your mammogram for at least eight years. They can then compare your

latest mammogram with the ones you have had before. Digital mammograms are viewed on a computer screen, and stored electronically.

We regularly review all screening records, including mammograms, as part of our aim to offer you a quality service and to help increase the expertise of specialist staff. This means that staff who work elsewhere in the health service will need to see your records. When a review shows that you should have been cared for differently, we will offer you more information about the review of your case if you want to know it.

For more information about the records we keep, you can contact **NHS Direct** on **0845 4647**.

Summary

To help you decide whether or not to come for breast screening, the main benefits and difficulties of screening for breast cancer are explained below.

- Most breast cancers are found at an early stage when there is a good chance of a successful recovery.

- Around half the cancers that are found at screening are still small enough to be removed from the breast. This means that the whole breast does not have to be removed.
- Breast screening saves an estimated 1,400 lives each year in this country.
- Breast screening reduces the risk of the women who attend dying from breast cancer.
- We will call back some women for more investigations if we are not sure about their mammogram. After more tests, we will find that many of these women will not have cancer. If you are called back it can cause worry.
- Screening may miss some breast cancers.
- Not all breast cancers that are found at screening can be cured.
- Many women find mammography uncomfortable or painful, but normally just for a brief period of time.

More information and support

If you have any questions about the service, you can:

- ask your doctor;
- contact your local screening office;
- visit our cancer-screening programme website at www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk;
- visit NHS Direct at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk; or
- to read womens' own views on breast screening, visit www.healthtalkonline.org

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