

Mammograms. Here are the facts.



What is a mammogram?

A mammogram, also known as a breast screening, is an X-ray of your breasts that checks for signs of cancer. They aim to detect breast cancer early, before you or your doctor notices any signs of a problem.

There's a national NHS breast screening programme for women of a certain age in the UK, where women are invited for a breast scan every three years. In most areas the age range for this is 50 to 70. You can also have a breast screening mammogram at some private clinics like this one.

Preparing for your mammogram

You don't need to do anything in particular before your mammogram, and you can eat and drink as usual before your appointment. You'll need to undress above your waist, so wearing a skirt or trousers is always easier. But don't worry, gowns are available too.

On the day, you'll see one of the doctors for your health assessment, who will ask about any symptoms or history of breast disease including cancer, your family history and do a breast examination. The doctor will then complete a mammogram request form which will be given to the radiographer, who may clarify your details before they start the mammogram.

What happens during a mammogram?

Your mammogram will be carried out by a radiographer – a healthcare professional who specialises in taking X-rays. This will always be a woman.

When you arrive at your appointment, the radiographer will explain what happens during a mammogram and answer any questions you have. You'll then be asked to undress above your waist. This includes your bra if you wear one.

The radiographer will show you where to stand for the mammogram, which will be very close to the X-ray machine. Your breasts are X-rayed one at a time, and two pictures are taken of each, one from above and one from the side. The radiographer will help you flatten your breast between two X-ray plates, which then press together firmly to get a clear X-ray. Once it's finished, you can get dressed and go home straightaway.

Digital images of your breasts will be stored on a computer for a consultant radiologist to look at. They'll produce a report that will be sent back to the doctor who requested the mammogram who'll talk to you about the results.

How does it feel?

A mammogram only lasts for a few seconds, but you may find this uncomfortable. People can find this painful, if you've experienced this in the past let the radiographer know before your appointment and they'll try to reduce your chances of feeling any pain.

What to expect afterwards

You may feel a bit sore a few hours after a mammogram, so take it easy. You can take over-the-counter painkillers, such as ibuprofen or paracetamol, to ease any pain. If you're not sure what to take, speak to a pharmacist or ask the radiographer when you have your appointment.

Your results

If your routine mammogram picks up anything abnormal, you'll be asked to go for more tests. Around four in every 100 women who have a mammogram are called back for more tests. This doesn't necessarily mean you have cancer – most women called back don't.

Always be breast aware

Even if you're having regular mammograms, you should still be regularly checking that your breasts look and feel normal. This way you're more likely to notice any changes.

Things to look out for:

- changes in size or shape of your breasts
- breasts or nipples feeling different
- discharge from your nipples

Most changes in your breasts or nipples won't be signs of cancer, but you should contact your GP as soon as you can.

Deciding on having a mammogram

Having a mammogram is a chance to check for any problems, but it's your choice whether to have one. These pros and cons should help you make an informed decision. If you're still unsure, a doctor or nurse at your clinic or GP practice can talk things through with you.

Pros

- Breast screening picks up over 8 out of 10 breast cancers in women over 50.
- Most cancers found during a mammogram are at an early stage – they may have been too small to see or feel. This is usually easier to treat.
- Reassurance – if nothing is found, that's good news.

Cons

- You may find having the mammogram slightly uncomfortable.
- There are some breast changes that might not develop into cancer. These can be picked up by breast screening, and you may end up having more treatment than you really would have needed.
- You'll be exposed to a small amount of radiation during the mammogram.

What do other women think?

In a small survey, we asked 129 women attending one of our health clinics about their feelings before and after having a mammogram. Beforehand, more than one in two said they felt a "a tiny bit nervous" or outright worried. Here's what they had to say afterwards:

"Not as painful as I expected. Just a little uncomfortable and unusual."

"The radiographer helped ease my experience."

"Uncomfortable (bordering painful) but only lasted a short time."

Looking for more information?

Bupa

bupa.co.uk/health-information/womens-health

Breast Cancer Care

www.breastcancercare.org.uk/information-support

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