

Important information for women about breast screening mammography

What is mammography?

Mammography is an X-ray examination of the breast and is an effective means of detecting or investigating breast disease. It is used particularly to diagnose small breast cancers and can detect a change in the breast tissue before you can feel or notice anything unusual. It can also show small deposits of calcium in the breast, which may be a sign of early cancer or changes that could lead to cancer.

Although mammography is the best method available for detecting small cancers, it will not detect all cancers as a small number are either not visible on X-ray or may not be detected, even by an experienced radiologist.

Who is at risk of breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in the UK and the number of new cases increases with age. This means that the disease is unusual under the age of 40 and that women between the ages of 40 and 50 are less likely to develop breast cancer than those aged 50 and over.

Recent research has indicated that while in some families a history of breast cancer may increase your risk, the increase in risk is only significant in those who are generally pre-disposed. There is no proven benefit for mammography under the age of 40.

Who is offered mammography?

Research shows that population screening is an effective method of reducing the death rate from breast cancer in women over the age of 40. This reduction may be as high as 40-50 percent in those who are screened regularly.

There are difficulties in screening younger women, as the breast tissue tends to be more dense which can make reading mammograms more difficult. The NHS Breast Screening Programme provides screening for all women aged 50 to 70 every three years. Bupa recommends mammography from the age of 40 onwards.

The most appropriate frequency for mammograms is every two years for most women over the age of 50. However annual mammography is recommended for women aged 40-49. Mammography should not be performed more frequently than every 12 months unless recommended by a breast specialist.

What happens if I am unable to have a mammogram on the day of my appointment for a health assessment?

We will be happy to carry out your mammogram at a later date to suit you at no extra charge. However this must be within three months of your original appointment.

If you are unable to attend within three months then we will have to ask you to book a Bupa Breast Health check at an extra charge.

What are the radiation risks?

The risk of cancer from mammography is very low. General opinion and research suggests that overall the benefit of regular mammography greatly outweighs any small risk.

All radiographers performing mammography in Bupa, hold the college of Radiographers Certificate of Competence in Mammography, Additionally all equipment used undergoes regular quality checks to ensure that optimal mammogram films are obtained.

What are the benefits?

Mammography can detect cancers that may be too small to feel, but are visible on high quality films read by a specialist radiologist.

If the cancer is detected when it is small and has not had a chance to spread there is a greater chance of successful treatment than if detected later at a more advanced stage. The benefit of screening women from 40 is thought to significantly outweigh the potential risk.

Is there anything I should do prior to the mammogram?

We ask that you do not use a spray deodorant or talcum powder on the day of your appointment as these may affect the quality of the mammogram films. However, you may use a roll-on deodorant without causing problems.



How is the mammogram taken?

The mammogram is always taken by a specially trained female radiographer. Two X-rays will be taken of each breast, which will be compressed between an X-ray film and a perspex plate, so that all the breast tissue can be seen clearly, and to prevent any movement. This examination may be uncomfortable for a few seconds but is usually well tolerated by most women. A few women may experience some reddening of the skin and occasionally tenderness for a short time afterwards.

What if an abnormality is detected?

Not all abnormalities on a mammogram are due to cancer. The majority of abnormalities are due to benign conditions. Following a routine mammogram, a proportion of women may need further assessment in a specialist Breast Clinic.

The aim of this is to clearly distinguish between those X-ray changes which are benign and harmless, and those which may need further treatment. This further assessment which may involve investigations such as additional mammograms, ultrasound, and a clinical examination by a specialist.

Some cases may need a sample of tissue to be taken, normally under local anaesthetic using a small needle.

Remember that most women who need further investigations will not be found to have cancer. Mammography may detect a condition called DCIS - ductal carcinoma in situ. DCIS occurs when the cells lining the milk ducts (the channels in the breast that carry milk to the nipple) become cancerous, but stay contained within the ducts without growing through into surrounding breast tissue.

The treatment of DCIS is the subject of intense research at the moment, as it seems that not all women with DCIS will develop invasive breast cancer if it is left untreated. If you are diagnosed with DCIS, you will be advised to seek advice from a breast specialist.

What else can I do?

Although mammography is the most effective way of detecting cancer, it will not detect all cancers, as some will not be visible on X-ray, or may develop after the X-ray. Nor does the X-ray itself protect you against cancer. It is also important to remember that a normal mammogram result does not mean that breast cancer cannot arise in the future, or even between breast mammography screenings. For this reason Bupa recommends regular mammography screening.

In addition, it is still important to be breast aware. Breast awareness is not about looking for problems but getting to know what is normal for you. If you do find anything out of the ordinary, please contact your GP.

What about breast implants?

If you have had a breast implant we can still do a mammogram. However, because the implant may mask some areas of the breast, the mammogram will be less sensitive at picking up early changes, and it may be more difficult to see abnormalities on the X-ray.

Women who have had a breast implant should still have regular mammography, and should also be "breast aware".

Important

If you have had a mammogram before and have the X-ray films, please bring the films with you to your appointment. This will allow comparison to be made with previous films. Remember that we will not normally do a mammogram if it is less than 12 months since your last one if you are under 50, and less than 24 months since your last one if you are over 50.

Breast feeding

We will not be able to perform a mammogram when you are breast feeding, or for six months after you have stopped breast-feeding. This is because there are changes in the breast that make interpretation of the X-ray films less reliable. If you notice any abnormalities in your breast at this time you should contact your GP.

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