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*Source: National Cancer Institute  
[www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/breast/page5](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/wyntk/breast/page5)*

## What You Need to Know About Mammograms and Breast Cancer

Screening for breast cancer before there are symptoms can be important. Screening can help doctors find and treat cancer early. Treatment is more likely to work well when cancer is found early.

To find breast cancer early, the National Cancer Institute recommends that:

- Women in their 40s and older should have mammograms every 1 to 2 years. A mammogram is a picture of the breast made with x-rays.
- Women who are younger than 40 and have risk factors for breast cancer should ask their health care provider whether to have mammograms and how often to have them.
- Mammograms can often show a breast lump before it can be felt. They also can show a cluster of tiny specks of calcium. These specks are called microcalcifications. Lumps or specks can be from cancer, precancerous cells, or other conditions. Further tests are needed to find out if abnormal cells are present.

If an abnormal area shows up on your mammogram, you may need to have more X-rays. You also may need a biopsy. A biopsy is the only way to tell for sure if cancer is present.

Mammograms are the best tool doctors have to find breast cancer early. However, mammograms are not perfect:

- A mammogram may miss some cancers. (The result is called a "false negative.")
- A mammogram may show things that turn out not to be cancer. (The result is called a "false positive.")
- Some fast-growing tumors may grow large or spread to other parts of the body before a mammogram detects them.
- Mammograms (as well as dental X-rays, and other routine X-rays) use very small doses of radiation. The risk of any harm is very slight, but repeated X-rays could cause problems. The benefits nearly always outweigh the risk. You should talk with your health care provider about the need for each X-ray. You should also ask for shields to protect parts of your body that are not in the picture.