

# Early detection of breast cancer: Screening mammograms

## Why are screening mammograms so important?

When breast cancer is detected early women have a much greater chance of being treated successfully and for most women the cancer will not come back after treatment. The chance of a woman developing breast cancer during her lifetime is 1 in 11. Over 11,000 women are diagnosed each year in Australia.

Screening mammograms are currently the best method available for detecting breast cancer early. Mammograms may find a breast cancer which is too small to feel.

## What is a screening mammogram?

Mammograms are low dose x-rays of a woman's breasts. Screening mammograms are performed on women without any symptoms of breast cancer. They are provided free of charge from the BreastScreen Australia program. For women over 50 years of age it is recommended they have a mammogram every two years.

## Who should have a regular screening mammogram?

The biggest risk factors for developing breast cancer are being a woman and getting older. BreastScreen Australia targets women aged 50 to 69 years as 70% of all breast cancers occur in women over the age of 50 years.

- Screening mammograms are often less reliable for women under 40 years of age. The density of breast tissue in younger women often makes it difficult to detect cancers on mammograms.
- All women aged 40 to 49 years who have no breast symptoms also have free access to the BreastScreen Australia program should they choose to have screening mammogram.
- All women aged 50 to 69 years are encouraged to have a free mammogram every two years through BreastScreen Australia.
- Women aged over 70 years who have no breast symptoms also have free access to the BreastScreen Australia program. They should discuss whether to have a mammogram with their doctor.

## Where can I have a screening mammogram?

BreastScreen is a free nationally accredited screening program. To contact your local BreastScreen service, call 13 20 50 for the cost of a local call.

There are currently over 500 screening locations including mobile screening units covering rural and remote areas across Australia.

## What if I have a family history of breast cancer?

Breast cancer is a common disease in Australian women. By chance some women will have a relative who has had breast cancer, however less than 5% of all breast cancers are caused by a family history.

If you have a family history of breast cancer and are concerned about your risk speak to your doctor.

## What to look out for

Women of all ages should be familiar with the normal look and feel of their breasts. If you notice any of the following changes please see your doctor immediately:

- A lump, lumpiness or thickening
- Changes in the skin of a breast, such as puckering, dimpling or a rash
- Persistent or unusual pain
- A change in the shape or size of a breast
- Discharge from a nipple, a nipple rash or a change in its shape.

## What else can I do?

- Eat for health – choose a varied diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Be physically active, on most, preferably all days.
- Limit your alcohol intake. The more you drink the greater your risk of developing cancer. If you don't drink don't start. If you choose to drink – no more than one standard drink per day.

## Where can I get reliable information?

### The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

for information and support for you and your family.  
[www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)

### BreastScreen Australia

13 20 50  
[www.breastscreen.info.au](http://www.breastscreen.info.au)

*The Cancer Council Australia acknowledges BreastScreen WA for their contribution in developing this fact sheet.*