

Mammogram: What to Expect

A mammogram is an X-ray of the breast. There are usually two main reasons for getting a mammogram: screening and diagnosis. A screening mammogram is for someone who doesn't have any current breast problems. Mammograms are also used to diagnose a breast problem.

Although both mammograms are done the same way, this video covers mammograms that are screening for breast cancer. Because a mammogram can find or detect early signs of cancer, it reduces a person's chance of dying from breast cancer.

If you're a little worried about getting a mammogram or getting the results, you're not alone. Most people share your feelings. It can help when you know what to expect.

When you schedule your mammogram, be sure to tell your mammogram provider if you have breast implants, you are or might be pregnant, you're breastfeeding, or you've had a breast biopsy.

On the day of the mammogram, don't use any deodorant, perfume, powders, or lotions. They can cause problems with the X-rays. You'll be asked to remove your clothes above the waist and take off any jewelry.

You'll be given an exam gown to wear during the test. A technologist will guide you through every step of the test.

You'll stand very close to the machine. One of your breasts will be placed on a flat surface, called a plate. The technologist may need to move your breast on the plate so that it's in the right position. The technologist will also tell you where to put your arms.

And they may need to gently touch your shoulder, head, or neck to get you in position. A second plate will press firmly down on your breast from above, flattening your breast between the plates. This helps to get an X-ray that has the best view of your breast tissue.

The pressure on your breast may feel uncomfortable for a few seconds, but it shouldn't be painful. Be sure to speak up if it hurts. You'll be asked to hold your breath for a few seconds while pictures of your breast are taken.

Then the technologist will release the plates. Usually at least two pictures are taken of each breast: one from the top and one from the side. Then each of these steps will be repeated for the other breast. After your mammogram, you'll be able to get back to your usual activities right away.

Your doctor's office or mammogram clinic will let you know your results. And just so you know, you may be asked to come back for a follow-up. This happens more often than you might expect.

That's because minor differences and other changes in your breast can show up in the X-ray. It may help to know that most of these differences are not a sign of cancer.

Having a mammogram can be stressful, but it's safe and usually doesn't take very long. Knowing what to expect may help you to relax. And being relaxed can help make a mammogram just a little bit more comfortable.