

Breast cancer screening: Is it right for you?

At some time in their life, most women will make a decision about getting a mammogram. This decision is a personal one, and it's important to know the risks and benefits of this screening test before you make it. Factors such as your age, family history, and previous biopsy history may all affect your possible outcomes of having a mammogram.

Two possible benefits from breast screening include:

- A reduced risk of dying from breast cancer.
- The need for less intensive treatment for breast cancer.

Two possible harms of breast screening include:

- The need for more testing, including breast biopsies to rule out cancer, which may reveal suspicious spots that turn out to be normal (called a *false-positive*, similar to a false alarm).
- Having a cancer detected and treated that may never have caused symptoms or affected your life expectancy (called *overdiagnosis*).

In general in BC, the number of false-positives decreases as women age, while the number of cancers detected increase (see the table). In addition, women with a family history of breast cancer are over 1.6 times more likely to have cancer detected by screening than women with no family history.

Screening outcome rates (per 1000 women)*

Age group	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79
False-positive	88	67	55	50
False-positive biopsy	8.5	6.7	5.6	5.7
Cancer detected	2	4	6	8

* BC Cancer Agency Screening Mammography Program

No one can accurately predict who will benefit from screening and who will end up having treatment that might not be necessary. If you choose to be screened you are accepting both the possibility of having your life extended as well as the possibility of being overdiagnosed or treated. If you choose not to screen, you run a slightly higher risk of dying because of having a breast cancer that wasn't found and treated early enough.

Upon reviewing the evidence available, the BC Cancer Agency recommends that by age 50 women have regular mammograms for breast screening. If you decide that breast cancer screening is right for you, call 1 800 663-9203 to make an appointment. You do not need a doctor's referral.

Further information about the screening program can be found at www.screeningbc.ca.

GLOSSARY

biopsy – Taking a small sample of tissue to help make a diagnosis

false-positive – The result of a screening test that suggests there is disease when in fact none is present

overdiagnosis – Diagnosis of a disease that will not affect your life expectancy or quality of life

screening – A test done on a healthy person to find an unsuspected disease