



# FACTS FOR LIFE Breast Cancer Detection

## Breast cancer screening methods

**Mammogram** — A mammogram is an X-ray picture of the breast. It is done with a special X-ray machine designed just for this purpose. A mammogram can find many cancers before they can be felt. Find your age on the chart below to see which screening methods you should use and how often.

**Clinical breast exam** — A breast exam by a health care provider should be part of your regular medical checkup. If it is not, ask for it. A clinical breast exam includes a visual examination and carefully feeling the entire breast and underarm area. If you are 40 or older, schedule your mammogram close to the time of your clinical breast exam.

**Breast self-exam (BSE)** — Learn the normal look and feel of your breasts, and check for changes every month just as your period is ending. If you no longer have periods, do BSE the same day each month. Many women have a pattern of lumpiness in their breasts, which is normal. But if you feel any change or a new lump in your breasts or underarms, ask your doctor to examine the area. (For step-by-step BSE instructions, go to [www.komen.org/bse](http://www.komen.org/bse).)

Women under age 40 with either a family history of breast cancer or other concerns about their personal risk should talk with their health care provider about when to start getting mammograms and how often to have them.

| Age 20-39            | Frequency                  | Age 40 and older     | Frequency    |
|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| clinical breast exam | at least every three years | mammogram            | once a year  |
| breast self-exam     | once a month               | clinical breast exam | once a year  |
|                      |                            | breast self-exam     | once a month |

## Now is the best time

Believe it or not, the best time to check for breast cancer is when your breasts feel fine. If you can find cancer early, there is a much better chance for survival. Three basic screening methods are used to look for breast cancer: mammograms, clinical breast exams and breast self-exams. Mammography is the best screening method widely available today for finding breast cancer early. However, it is not perfect. Many breast lumps found by these methods turn out not to be cancer, and sometimes a real cancer is missed. But if you do *all* the methods regularly (based on your age — see below), a problem missed one time may be caught the next. Or one method might find a problem that another does not.

Remember, even if you feel healthy now, just being a woman and getting older puts you at risk for breast cancer. Getting checked regularly can put your mind at ease. And finding cancer early could save your life.

For more information, call Susan G. Komen for the Cure at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) or visit [www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org).

## Questions to ask

Talk with your health care provider about your breast health needs. If you have not had any of the screening methods before, ask which ones are right for you.

Here are some questions you might want to ask:

1. Do I need a mammogram? If not, why not?
2. Where can I go to get a mammogram?
3. What if I cannot afford a mammogram?
4. Is there any reason I should have a mammogram more often than usual?
5. What is the best way to do a breast self-exam?
6. How often do I need a clinical breast exam?
7. What is my personal risk for getting breast cancer?
8. Should I consider additional tests or treatments related to my risk?

## Resources

You can receive information about mammograms and clinical breast exams by contacting the organizations listed on this page. You may also go to [www.komen.org/bse](http://www.komen.org/bse) for step-by-step BSE instructions.

Susan G. Komen for the Cure  
1-877 GO KOMEN  
[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

American Cancer Society  
1-800-ACS-2345  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service  
1-800-4 CANCER  
[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

## Trouble signs that should not be ignored

Although doctors are specially trained to find breast lumps or other changes and a mammogram can find even smaller changes, many breast lumps are found by women themselves at home. A woman who knows the look and feel of her own breasts may notice a new lump or a change between doctor visits.

When you do your breast self-exam every month, look and feel for the following signs of possible problems in your breast or underarm area. If you notice any of them, make an appointment to show them to your health care provider right away.

- lumps, hard knot or thickening in any part of the breast
- unusual swelling, warmth, redness or darkening that does not go away
- change in the size or shape of your breast
- an itchy, scaly sore or rash on the nipple
- dimpling or puckering of the skin of your breast
- pulling in of the nipple or other parts of the breast
- nipple discharge that starts suddenly
- pain in one spot that does not vary with your monthly cycle

### Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Facts
- Mammography
- When You Discover a Lump
- Benign Breast Changes

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The above list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast health and breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen for the Cure does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.

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