

# MAMMOGRAMS – THE FACTS

February 2018



- A screening mammogram is a low dose x-ray of the breast.
- Screening mammograms are used to check for breast cancer in women with no symptoms of the disease. 2 images are usually taken of each breast. A free screening mammogram is available through BreastScreen Aotearoa for well women aged 45-69. Private radiology clinics also provide mammography services.
- A diagnostic mammogram is used to check for breast cancer when a lump or other sign or symptom has been found. More images are taken compared to a screening mammogram. Free diagnostic mammograms are provided by District Health Boards (with a GP's referral) for women at high risk for breast cancer and for women and men with significant breast signs or symptoms.
- Mammograms can pick up very small breast cancers sometimes as small as two millimetres whereas tumours have often grown to two to three centimetres (the size of a cherry or walnut) before they can be felt. Mammograms can also detect microcalcifications (tiny calcium deposits) which might indicate the presence of cancer or pre-cancer.
- A mammogram involves the breast being carefully positioned by a medical radiation technologist (MRT) between two perspex plates on a mammography x-ray machine; the plates gently compress and spread out the breast tissue so that anything abnormal can be more clearly seen by the specialist radiologists reading the x-ray images.
- Around 5% of women find mammograms painful. For most women, any discomfort is mild and tolerable and lasts for only a short period.
- The radiation dose from a mammogram is very low and is approximately equivalent to the amount of natural background radiation we each receive from our environment over a two- month period.
- The benefit of a mammogram (early detection of a potentially curable breast cancer) far outweighs any increased risk of developing breast cancer as a result of the small amount of radiation exposure.
- A mammogram can detect 80-90% of breast cancers. Those missed are often in younger women and women with dense breast tissue.
- Mammograms in young women.- Breast tissue is denser in women under the age of 40-45 so mammograms are not as good at detecting breast cancer in this younger age group. Cancers are more likely to be missed (false negative result) and "abnormalities" identified which are not, in fact cancer (false positive result).

- Mammograms in older women. – Breast cancer risk increases with age so if you are over 70 and in good health you might wish to continue breast screening. The current age range for free screening with Breastscreen Aotearoa is 45-69 but this is planned to increase to 45-74.
- Screening mammograms do not stop the development of breast cancer, but can reduce the risk of dying from breast cancer by approximately 33%.
- Mammography is more effective as a breast cancer screening tool or breast cancer diagnostic tool than breast thermography. A breast thermogram is not an adequate replacement for a screening or diagnostic mammogram.
- The best way to ensure early detection of breast cancer is to supplement regular mammograms with general breast awareness. Know what your breasts normally look and feel like and report any changes to your GP promptly. Don't ignore any changes which develop between mammograms.

**To enrol with BreastScreen Aotearoa, call 0800 270 200  
or visit [www.timetoscreen.nz](http://www.timetoscreen.nz)**