



Public Health
England



NHS Breast Screening Programme

Over 70?

You can still have breast screening if you choose



Breast screening

Breast screening is a way of detecting breast cancer, often at a very early stage. It involves x-rays called mammograms.

This leaflet tells you more about breast screening if you are over 70 and what you are entitled to.

Women over 70 are still at risk of breast cancer. But we do not routinely invite these women for breast screening. This is because there is no scientific evidence that screening these older women brings them more benefits than harms.

This is why some national research (called the 'age extension trial') is taking place. It involves inviting half of all women aged 71 to 73 for screening. You may receive an invitation when you are this age.

If you are over 70 and want to continue routine screening, you do have the right to free screening every 3 years if you ask. All you need to do is phone or write to your local breast screening unit to make an appointment. Find details of your local unit at www.nhs.uk/breastscreening.

The risk of breast cancer over 70

If you are over 70 you are more at risk of getting breast cancer than a younger woman. This is because the risk of getting breast cancer increases with age. About 1 in 3 of all breast cancers occur in women over the age of 70.

Possible benefits and risks of breast screening in women over 70

We know that in women aged 50 to 70, about 1,300 lives are saved each year by finding breast cancer early. This means that one life is saved for every 200 women screened.

If small changes in the breast are found early, there is a good chance of recovery. But about 4,000 women each year are affected by overdiagnosis. This means that screening finds a cancer that would never have become life-threatening. As women get older, overdiagnosis becomes more common. So it is more likely that women over 70 could end up having treatment they do not need.

It is your choice whether or not to be screened. You can continue to be screened every 3 years if you want.

If you have previously had breast cancer, you can still be at risk. As long as you still have breast tissue, you can ask for screening every 3 years.

Before going for breast screening

Your breast screening appointment may be in a hospital, at a local breast screening unit, or on a mobile unit. We can help you to make a suitable appointment if you:

- need help dressing or undressing
- need wheelchair access
- have a problem getting to your appointment
- have breast implants

Please phone your local breast screening unit to discuss your needs.

Screening staff will be able to help you even if your first language is not English. We can provide information about breast screening in a range of languages and in an easy read format. You will find these at www.gov.uk/government/collections/breast-screening-information-leaflets

Your screening appointment

When you arrive you will be seen by a female mammographer who will explain what will happen. She will check your details, and ask about any breast problems you may have had. You can ask her any questions you have about breast screening.

You will need to undress to the waist to have your x-rays so it is a good idea to wear a skirt or trousers and a top.

The mammographer will place your breast onto the mammogram machine and lower a plastic plate onto it to flatten it. This keeps your breast still so they can get clear x-rays. The mammographer will take 2 x-rays of each breast.

The whole appointment takes less than half an hour, and the mammograms take only a few minutes.

What happens if something is found

We ask about 1 in every 20 women screened to come to an assessment clinic because more tests are needed. Sometimes women are called back because their first x-rays were not clear enough.

Being called back for more tests does not usually mean that you have cancer. Most women who need further tests will not have cancer. Only 1 in 8 will have cancer. If we do diagnose cancer, earlier treatment is more likely to be successful.

If breast cancer is diagnosed

Most breast cancers found at screening are at an early stage. This means treatment can be more effective. Many women with breast cancer live a normal life following treatment.

It is not always possible to cure breast cancer completely but early diagnosis may offer more treatment options. Around 2 out of 3 cancers found at screening are still small enough to be removed from the breast. This means that the whole breast does not have to be removed. Removing the whole breast is called a mastectomy.

Not all breast cancers will cause harm during a woman's lifetime, even if they aren't treated. However doctors cannot always tell which cancers will become life-threatening or not. This means we offer treatment to all women with breast cancer.

Clinical trials for women diagnosed with cancer

You may be offered the chance to take part in a clinical research trial. These are used to gather information about the best types of treatment for breast cancer. This means we can help women more effectively in the future. The doctor will talk about any available trials with you, so that you can decide if you want to take part or not.

Being ‘breast aware’

Being ‘breast aware’ simply means:

- getting to know how your breasts look and feel at different times
- telling your doctor straight away if you notice any unusual changes

Breast tissue changes as you get older, and every woman’s breasts are different.

It is important that you continue to look at and check your breasts regularly, even if you have just had a mammogram.

It’s as simple as TLC...

TOUCH your breasts. Can you feel anything unusual?

LOOK for changes. Is there any change in shape or texture?

CHECK anything unusual with your doctor

The images and TLC information are reproduced with permission of Breast Cancer Now.

Look for unusual changes



Lump - may not be seen but might be felt



Skin texture such as dimpling or puckering



Appearance or direction of nipple



Nipple discharge



Rash or crusting

Although it is rare, men can get breast cancer too. Men with symptoms should speak to their doctor as soon as possible.

More information about breast screening is at www.nhs.uk/breast

Find out how Public Health England and the NHS use and protect your screening information at www.gov.uk/phe/screening-data

Order this leaflet: www.gov.uk/phe/screening-leaflets

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