

# How often should I get a mammogram?

**Ages  
50-74**

## BREAST CANCER SCREENING



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An affiliation between  
Central Washington Hospital &  
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## Introduction

Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers among women. All major health professional organizations recommend routine mammograms for women between ages 50 and about 74 to screen for breast cancer. While the benefits of routine screening mammograms are clear for women ages 50-74, it is not yet clear how often mammograms should be done. Some groups recommend a mammogram every year and others every two years. To decide what is right for you, you should think about the benefits and possible harms that can result from getting mammograms. You also need to understand your risk of breast cancer and your personal health concerns.

This tool is designed to help you decide how often to get a screening mammogram.

***If you currently have any breast symptoms such as pain or lumps, please see your primary care provider right away and don't wait for a screening test.***

# 1

## Screening Mammograms

### What is a screening mammogram?

A mammogram is an X-ray of the breast. Screening mammograms are done to check for breast cancer in women who have no signs or symptoms of the disease. Mammograms can show changes in the breast up to two years before a patient or physician can feel them.

### Should I have a screening mammogram every one or two years?

#### Confluence Health Recommendation:

All women age 50-74 should have a mammogram at least once every two years.

#### Before you decide how often to have regular screening mammograms:

- 1 Understand your personal breast cancer risk.
- 2 Weigh the benefits and potential harms of screening mammography.
- 3 Discuss this decision with your primary care provider.



#### Key Points

- For women ages 50-74 with **AVERAGE** risk for breast cancer, most studies tell us that having a mammogram every two years gives about the same overall benefit as having a mammogram every year.
- For women ages 50-74 with **HIGHER** risk for breast cancer, yearly screening mammograms may be better.
- There may be a slightly better chance of finding a cancer at an earlier and more curable stage with yearly mammograms.
- Having a mammogram only every two years **lowers the possible harms of mammography**.
- Women may differ in their feelings about breast cancer and the possible benefits and harms of mammography.

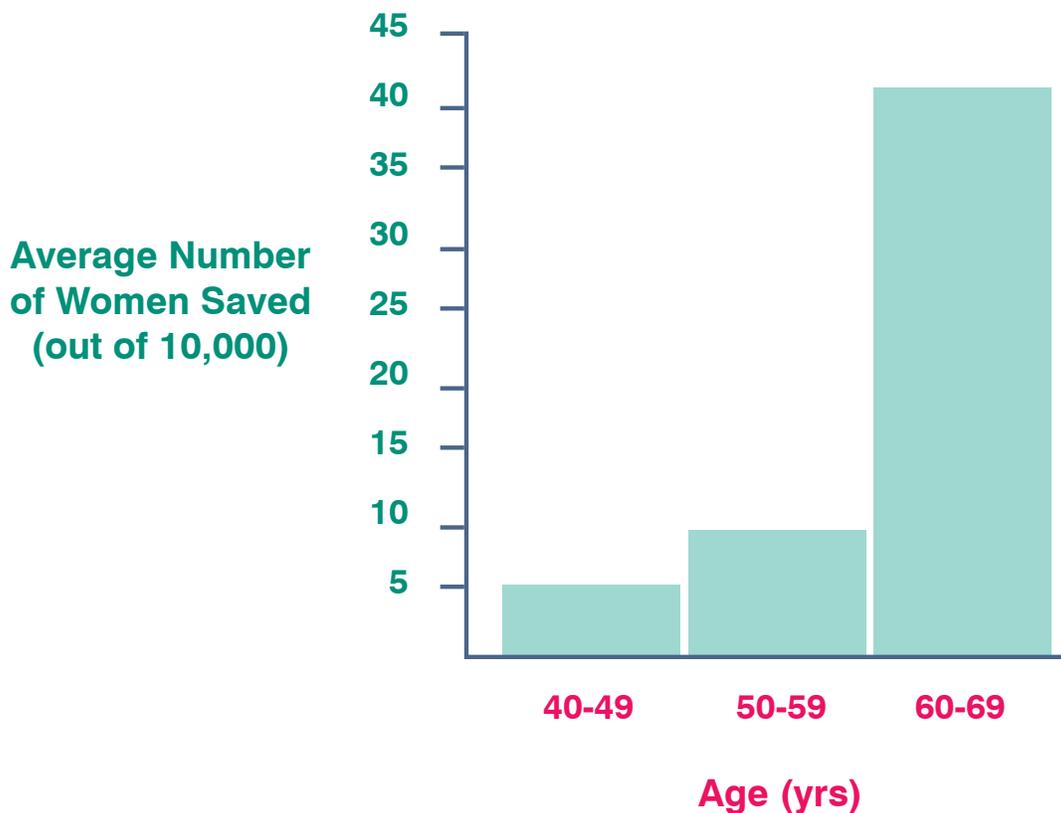
## 2

# Benefits of Mammograms

## What are the benefits of having screening mammograms?

Screening mammograms can find breast cancer early, before you have symptoms. Finding a cancer earlier may make it easier to treat. This might mean avoiding chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery that could be needed for more advanced cancer. Regular screening mammograms reduce your chances of dying of breast cancer. The benefits of screening mammograms increase with age. If 10,000 women get regular mammograms between the ages of 50-59, about 10 of these women will have their lives saved because of screening mammograms. If 10,000 women get regular mammograms between the ages of 60-69, about 42 of these women will have their lives saved because of screening mammograms. *(from the Journal of the American Medical Association, April 2014).*

### Likelihood of a Mammogram Saving You from Dying of Breast Cancer as You Age



## What are the possible harms of mammograms?

Mammograms are not a perfect test. They do not change your chances of getting breast cancer. They **do** make cancer more likely to be found in early and more curable stages. Some breast cancers will not show up on mammograms. A few women will die of breast cancer even if they have regular mammograms.

**In deciding whether to get a mammogram every year or every two years, there are two problems with mammograms you should know about:**

### 1 False positives

You may have a “false positive” on a mammogram. This happens when a mammogram shows a spot that looks worrisome for cancer, but further testing shows there was no problem after all.

### 2 Overdiagnosis and overtreatment

Although it seems strange, some cancers found by screening mammograms will never cause any health problems in the future. This is called “overdiagnosis”. This is especially true of a certain type of cancer called “ductal carcinoma in situ”, or DCIS. It is not possible to predict which cancers found by mammogram will never become a problem, so all cancers found are generally treated. Studies have shown a wide range of how often overdiagnosis of cancer may happen. Middle-ground estimates suggest that in every 5 women diagnosed with breast cancer by mammogram, 1 is overdiagnosed. This means some women will get surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation treatment they don’t need.



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## Radiation Exposure

Some women are worried about radiation from mammograms. **Screening mammography is considered a very low risk examination.** It is important to understand that we are exposed to radiation from natural sources all the time. The amount of radiation that a woman receives from a digital mammogram is about one seventh of the total dose that we are exposed to yearly from natural sources.

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## Benefits of Screening Every 2 Years

**Are the benefits and possible harms different if I have a mammogram every two years instead of every year?**

### 1 Finding breast cancer early

Most studies show very little difference in benefit between getting a mammogram every year or every two years in women of average risk.

### 2 False Positives

Over the course of 10 years, 50 to 60 out of every 100 women who have a mammogram every year will have a “false positive” that leads to more pictures and possibly a biopsy. In women who have a mammogram every two years, this number of false positives is lowered to about 30 to 40 out of every 100 women.

### 3 Overdiagnosis and overtreatment

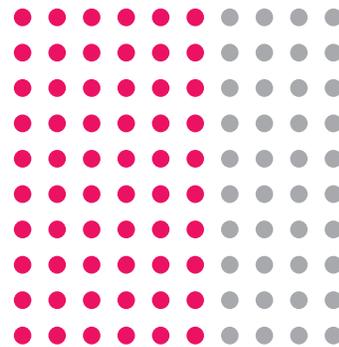
Having a mammogram every two years instead of every year may reduce your chances of overdiagnosis, but the exact number is not known.

### Average Risk of False Positives in Women

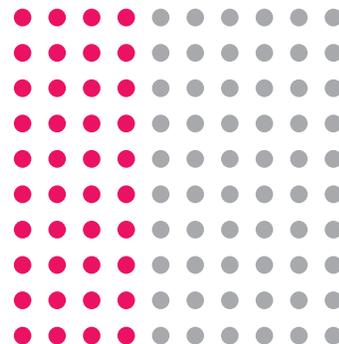
Average number of women (out of 100) who will have a false positive if they have a mammogram every year vs. every 2 years:

- = woman
- = woman with false positive

#### Mammogram Every Year



#### Mammogram Every 2 Years



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## Risk of Breast Cancer

### Who is at increased risk for breast cancer?

Many women are at average or “standard” risk for breast cancer. Some women are at increased risk.

**Some factors that increase your risk are:**

- ✓ **A first degree relative, such as a mother or sister, who has had breast cancer**
- ✓ **A previous biopsy not showing cancer but with abnormal result (called “atypia”)**
- ✓ **A previous but normal (called “benign”) breast biopsy**
- ✓ **Dense breasts on mammogram. This is not something you can determine without a mammogram**
- ✓ **Previous radiation treatments to the chest**

**Other risk factors may play a role as well.**

A Breast Cancer Risk Assessment Tool is available through the NCI (National Cancer Institute). This link will take you to the web site:

**[www.cancer.gov/bcrisktool](http://www.cancer.gov/bcrisktool)**

You can use this tool to estimate your personal risk of developing breast cancer. Your mammography result letter will also inform you of your lifetime risk of breast cancer using this same tool.

### ▶ Should women at higher risk of breast cancer have more frequent screening tests?

Yes. Many expert groups recommend that women at increased risk have mammograms every year. You should discuss this with your primary care provider.

### ▶ Should I have mammograms more often if I am very worried about breast cancer?

It is very reasonable to consider having yearly mammograms if you have deep concerns about waiting two years for your next mammogram. You should discuss your concerns with your primary care provider.

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## REFERENCES

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