



Mammogram 101



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Table of Contents

Preparing for a mammogram **3**

Before Your Mammogram 3

The Day Of Your Mammogram 4

During Your Mammogram: 4

After Your Mammogram 5

Where to Get a Free Mammogram **6**

Who To Talk To 6

Appendix **7**

Breast Cancer Symptom Checklist 7

COVID-19 Vaccine & Mammograms:
What You Need to Know. 8



Preparing for a mammogram

If you and your doctor have determined you need a mammogram, based on your age and personal risk factors, do not put off this important screening. There are things you can do to help make the process easier and more effective. This guide will help you partner with your medical professional to know what to do before, on the day of, during, and after your mammogram.

If you need access to a free or low-cost mammogram, NBCF can help. Refer to the “Where to Get a Free Mammogram” section of this guide to learn more.

Note: If you’ve received the COVID-19 vaccination recently, read about why you may want to delay your screening mammogram. See Appendix for more information.

Before Your Mammogram

- Try to schedule your mammogram appointment to fall a few days after your period ends. This is when your breasts are least sensitive. Read [How to Schedule a Mammogram](#) for more tips.
- Gather the following documents to take with you on the day of your appointment:

Proof of identification, such as a driver’s license or government-issued ID card

Proof of address, if required by your mammogram facility

Health insurance card or policy information, if applicable

A list of where and when you have had any previous mammograms, as well as the results of those mammograms

Completed Breast Cancer Symptom Checklist provided in the [Appendix](#) of this guide

Household income information (if you are receiving a free or low-cost mammogram, you may be required to provide documentation of your household income information)

- Read [4 Things to Share at Your Next Mammogram](#) to help you prepare mentally and physically.

The Day Of Your Mammogram

- Do not use any deodorant, lotion, cream, or powder on your underarms or breasts. These can sometimes interfere with the mammogram reading.
- Provide your mammogram facility with the documents you gathered.
- Provide your doctor or mammographer with a completed copy of the Breast Cancer Symptom Checklist from this guide (see Appendix).
- Verbally describe any symptoms or breast problems you are having to your doctor or mammographer.

Download the [Mammogram Prep Checklist](#) to stay on track and organized the day of your mammogram.

During Your Mammogram

Try to relax your entire body. During your mammogram, you will likely feel pressure for a few moments. While mammograms can be briefly uncomfortable, they should not cause pain for most women. However, tell your mammographer immediately if you experience pain during the imaging.

To help ease discomfort, some facilities offer mammogram cushions, which provide a softer, more comfortable mammogram. Ask your mammographer about these cushions, if you are interested in this option.

Remember that **clear and open communication is key to advocating for your breast health**. Be sure to share all important information with your mammographer, including any symptoms you are experiencing or if you have a family history of breast cancer.

After Your Mammogram

- If you do not hear from your healthcare provider or mammogram facility within 10 days, contact their office to ask for your results. You may also ask a [patient navigator](#) for help.
- If your mammogram results are normal, ask your healthcare provider when you should receive your next mammogram, based on your age and family history. Schedule this next appointment before you leave the office.
- If your mammogram results are abnormal, follow up with your healthcare provider immediately. We also encourage you to read our free resource, [Abnormal Mammograms & What to Do Next](#), which will arm you with the information you need to understand your next steps.
- Ask your doctor if you have dense breast tissue and how this may affect your mammogram results. Learn more about dense breast tissue in our free resource, [Dense Breast Q&A Guide](#).



Where to Get a Free Mammogram

Free or low-cost mammograms are available in many parts of the country. Below is information that can help you get a free or low-cost mammogram, if you qualify.

Who To Talk To

Many facilities have nurse or patient navigators who will help you obtain and complete the forms you need to receive a free or low-cost mammogram. Even if you do not have all the documentation, there is help available. A patient navigator can help you understand your options.

Resources:

National Mammography Program

National Breast Cancer Foundation (NBCF)'s [National Mammography Program \(NMP\)](#) provides access to breast and cervical cancer screening services to women in need in most states. Search our [partner database](#) to find a NMP facility near you.

National Breast & Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program

The Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)'s [National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program \(NBCCEDP\)](#) provides access to breast and cervical cancer screening services to women in need across the country.

The National Cancer Institute

The [National Cancer Institute](#) can direct you to a local resource for low-cost mammograms. You can call them at 1-800-422-6237 for more information.



Appendix

Breast Cancer Symptom Checklist

Complete this checklist if you have noticed any changes in your breasts. This will help you discuss the changes with your healthcare provider.

I have noticed these breast changes:

- A new lump or thickening in or near the breast or in the underarm area
- A change in the size or shape of the breast
- Dimpling or puckering in the skin of the breast
- A nipple turned inward into the breast (inverted nipple)
- Discharge (fluid) from the nipple
- Scaly, red, or swollen skin on the breast, nipple, or areola (the dark area of skin at the center of the breast)
- Other changes:

COVID-19 Vaccine & Mammograms: What You Need to Know

If I get the COVID-19 vaccine, does it impact when I should get my next screening exam (mammogram)?

It depends on the type of exam. If women can safely delay a **screening exam** (screening mammogram or screening breast MRI) for 4-6 weeks or get their screening exam before their COVID-19 vaccine, that would be best.

Diagnostic imaging and exams for evaluation of a new symptom (new lump, pain, nipple discharge, a new diagnosis of breast cancer) should not be delayed.

Why do I need to delay my screening mammogram after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine?

Breast imagers have been noticing underarm lymph node enlargement appearing on mammograms and breast MRIs, related to COVID-19 vaccine administration in the same arm that received the vaccination.

The COVID-19 vaccine triggers the immune system to be turned on, which in turn triggers the lymphatic system to turn on. This can result in the underarm lymph nodes (also known as axillary nodes) to swell and be what doctors call “reactive”. This can simulate an infection or even appear to be cancer in these nodes. **To avoid confusion and recall, the timing of a routine screening mammogram should be made based on when the COVID-19 vaccines were given.**

The COVID-19 vaccine causes more significant lymph node enlargement than other vaccines we have seen in the past (like the flu vaccine). Patients with enlarged underarm lymph nodes will be recalled from screening mammograms or MRIs for additional imaging like ultrasound.

I am concerned about delaying my screening mammogram after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. What can I do?

Patients should feel comfortable discussing any concerns with their healthcare team, whether that's a primary doctor or a nurse. If not prompted, it's recommended that the patient share whether she has had a COVID-19 vaccine, date, and which arm, so her healthcare team can record the details.