

Myths and facts about breast cancer

Mammograms are an important ally in the fight against breast cancer. Misinformation and fear are two of the toughest enemies.

Breast cancer comes complete with its own set of myths. Misinformation is dangerous because it downplays the need for screening, increases anxiety and gets in the way of having this potentially lifesaving examination.

If you are age 40 or older, you should talk to your healthcare provider about when and how often to have a clinical breast exam and mammogram. After age 50, women should get a mammogram at least every two years.

In an effort to encourage women to get their mammograms, we'll dispel some of the myths surrounding breast cancer and the important test that can detect it.



Myth	Fact
I don't need a mammogram because I have no family history.	While women who have a family history of breast cancer are in a higher-risk group, most women who have breast cancer have no family history of it. According to the National Cancer Institute, a woman has a 1 in 8 chance of being diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime. ¹ And according to the American Cancer Society, more than 85% of these women have no family history of the disease. ²
Mammograms hurt.	Over the past 20 years, both the equipment and how mammograms are done have greatly improved. Mammography does compress the breasts and can cause discomfort, but only for a very brief time. ³ This unpleasant feeling is a small trade-off for living cancer-free or catching breast cancer early.
I don't feel like anything's wrong, so I don't need a mammogram.	Mammograms can find cancer when it is very small, often years before a woman or her doctor would be able to feel it. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, regular mammograms are the best screening tool doctors have to find breast cancer early— sometimes up to three years before it can be felt. ³
Finding a lump in your breast means you have breast cancer.	Some women shy away from medical care because they fear what they might find. While it's very important to see your healthcare provider immediately if you discover a persistent lump in your breast or any changes in breast tissue, most breast changes turn out to be noncancerous. ⁴ Always get your healthcare provider to make the evaluation.

Myth	Fact
Mammograms cause cancer.	Mammograms use very small doses of radiation, making the risk of harm extremely low. The benefits of detecting and treating a life-threatening condition like breast cancer far outweigh the very small potential harm from radiation exposure. ³
Men don't get breast cancer.	According to the American Cancer Society, approximately 2,800 men were diagnosed with breast cancer in 2023. ⁵ Men should get any breast changes or lumps checked by a healthcare provider.
There's nothing you can do to lower your risk of breast cancer.	There are many risk factors for breast cancer; some can't be changed, but some can. You can lower your risk by exercising more, eating healthier, maintaining a healthy body weight, and limiting or eliminating alcohol. ²
If I have cancer in my breast, a mammogram is 100% guaranteed to find it.	Annual mammograms are vital for detecting breast cancer, but according to Johns Hopkins Medicine, if you have dense breasts, you may need additional testing (breast MRI or breast ultrasound) to find breast cancer. ⁴
My doctor didn't tell me to get a mammogram, so I am sure I am fine.	It is important to be your own health advocate. Let your doctor know if you are over the age of 40 and you have not had a mammogram this year, so that you can obtain an order. ¹

When you clear away the myths, the fact is this ...

You must be an advocate for yourself and for those you love. Talk to your healthcare provider about how often you need screening for breast cancer. Get your mammogram.

While you're speaking with your doctor about breast cancer and mammography, also ask about whether screening for colorectal cancer would be appropriate for you.

When was your last mammogram? _____/_____/_____

Questions for your doctor about mammograms / breast cancer risk:

Sources

1. "Breast Cancer Risk in American Women", National Cancer Institute, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cancer.gov/types/breast/risk-fact-sheet>.
2. "Breast Cancer", American Cancer Society, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer.html>.
3. "Mammography Myths", Johns Hopkins Medicine, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/breast-cancer/6-mammogram-myths>.
4. "Non-cancerous Breast Conditions", American Cancer Society, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/non-cancerous-breast-conditions.html>.
5. "Key Statistics for breast cancer in men", American Cancer Society, Last accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer-in-men/about/key-statistics.html>.



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