

What you should know about breast cancer screening

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is cancer that is found in the breast. It starts in the cells that line the ducts (tubes that carry milk) or the lobules (glands that make milk) and is one of the most commonly diagnosed cancers in Ontario.

What is cancer screening?

Cancer screening (getting checked for cancer) is testing done on people who have a chance of getting cancer, but who have no symptoms and generally feel fine. The Ontario Breast Screening Program (OBSP) is a province-wide screening program that aims to lower deaths from breast cancer by offering regular screening.

Potential benefits of breast cancer screening

Getting screened for breast cancer regularly with a mammogram (a type of X-ray) can find cancer early, when treatment has a better chance of working and can be less intensive or invasive (easier to handle). Screening regularly also lowers the chance of dying from breast cancer.

Who should get screened?

Women, Two-Spirit people, trans people and nonbinary people ages 40 to 74 qualify for the OBSP if they:

- Have no breast cancer symptoms
- Have not had breast cancer
- Have not had a bilateral mastectomy (surgery to remove both breasts)
- Have not had a screening mammogram in the last 11 months
- Are transfeminine and have used feminizing hormones for at least 5 years in a row

Average risk ages 40 to 74

Most people in this age group who qualify for the OBSP can get a mammogram every 2 years.

If you are age 40 to 49, you are encouraged to make an informed decision about whether breast cancer screening is right for you. Generally, people in your age group have a lower chance of getting breast cancer than people ages 50 to 74. Talk to your family doctor, nurse practitioner or call Health811 for help deciding whether to get screened.

Do you qualify for the High Risk OBSP?

You may qualify for the High Risk OBSP if you are age 30 to 69 and have certain gene changes (e.g., *BRCA1*, *BRCA2*), a higher chance of getting breast cancer based on your family or personal health history, or had radiation therapy to the chest. To find out more, talk to your family doctor or nurse practitioner, or visit the [Ontario Health \(Cancer Care Ontario\)](https://www.ontariohealth.ca/cancer-care-ontario) website.

Remember: Contact your family doctor or nurse practitioner if you notice any changes in your breasts, such as a lump or redness that does not go away, or changes to your nipple. Also, the effects of pregnancy or breastfeeding can hide the symptoms of breast cancer or cause them to be overlooked, so it is important to be aware of them. Changes to the breast are not always caused by cancer, but they should be checked right away.



Ontario Health
Cancer Care Ontario

How do I get a mammogram?

Contact an OBSP location to get a mammogram. To find a location, call 1.800.668.9304 or visit ontariohealth.ca/breastscreeninglocations.

Mammograms are safe, free and you can get one without an order from a family doctor or nurse practitioner.

What happens during a mammogram?

A mammogram is a test that uses X-rays to make images (mammograms) of the breast tissue.

- A medical radiation technologist (someone who is trained to take mammograms) will place one breast at a time on the mammogram machine.
- A plastic plate will move down slowly to press and hold the breast tissue in place. There will be some pressure for a few seconds, which does not harm the tissue.
- Mammograms appointments usually take about 15 minutes.

What happens after a mammogram?

If you have a normal result, you will get a letter in the mail. This letter will also let you know when you should get screened again.

If you have an abnormal result, it does not necessarily mean you have breast cancer, but it does mean you need to get more tests. Your OBSP location will tell your family doctor or nurse practitioner and may help make an appointment for you to get more testing. If you do not have a family doctor or nurse practitioner, you will be connected to one who can help with your next steps.

A mammogram is not a perfect test

You may get an abnormal result when you do not have cancer, which is called a false-positive. False-positives can lead to unneeded testing, like a biopsy (taking a small sample of tissue).

A mammogram may miss a cancer, which is called a false-negative. False-negatives could lead to delayed treatment.

A mammogram may also find a cancer that would not otherwise cause health problems, which is called overdiagnosis. Overdiagnosis may lead to unneeded surgery or treatment.

How can I lower my chances of getting breast cancer?

Some risk factors (things that can raise your chances of getting a disease) cannot be changed, such as age, height, genetic makeup, having dense breasts and hormone changes throughout your life (for example, having your period earlier or starting menopause later). But here are 4 things you can do to lower your chances of getting breast cancer:

- Avoid or drink less alcohol
- Quit smoking or remain smoke-free
- Be physically active as part of everyday life
- Avoid adult weight gain

For more information on breast cancer screening, please visit ontariohealth.ca/breast

