

What are breast calcifications?

As women get older, they sometimes get tiny spots of calcium in their breast. These little calcium deposits are called “calcifications.” They are too small to feel, but can be seen on a mammogram. They show up as small, bright white spots. Most of the time, they are harmless. But when they show up in certain patterns, they may be a cause for concern. For example, sometimes they grow in clusters or all in a line. These can be a sign of cancer.

Calcifications are common. They are found on about half of all mammograms in women ages 50 and older (and on about one in 10 mammograms of women under 50). Calcifications may be related to older age, past injury or inflammation (swelling) of the breast tissue (from an infection, for example). They are not related to the amount of calcium in a woman’s diet.

Types of calcifications

There are two main types of calcifications: macro (see photo A) and micro (see photo B).

- Macrocalcifications appear large and round on a mammogram. They are usually not related to cancer and do not usually need follow-up.
- Microcalcifications are small and may appear in clusters. They are usually benign, but can be a sign of breast cancer. Your doctor will note if they have changed over time. Follow-up tests may be needed to rule out cancer if they change over time.

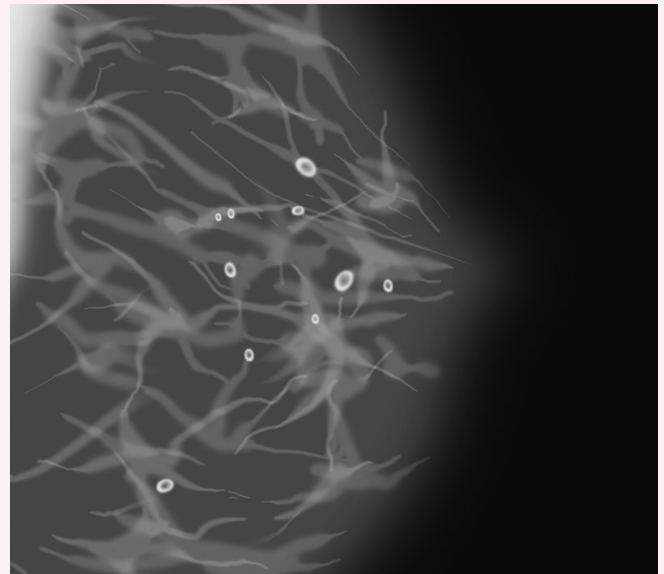


Photo A: Macrocalcifications are large and randomly spread throughout the breast. No follow-up care is needed.

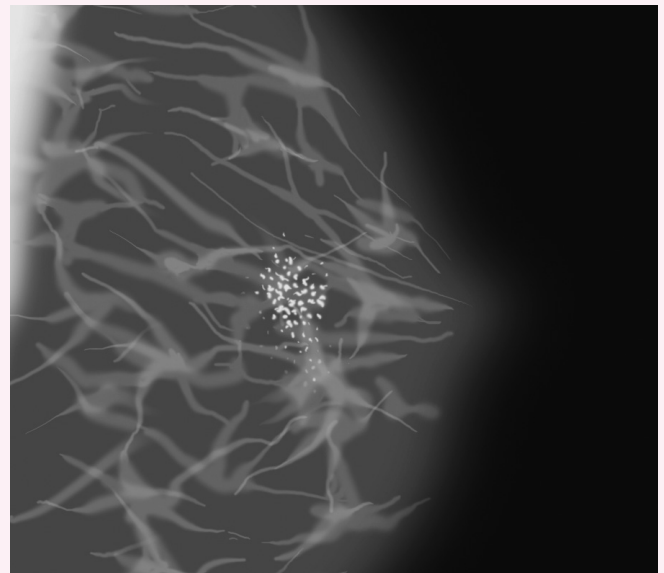


Photo B: Microcalcifications are small, appear clustered. These may be a sign of breast cancer. Follow-up mammograms or a biopsy may be needed.

Suspicious microcalcifications

Sometimes it is hard to tell if microcalcifications are a problem. More images may be needed. These images help decide if the microcalcifications are benign, probably benign or suspicious for cancer. If they are described as benign or probably benign, it is likely the area is not cancer. However, if they are called suspicious, more follow-up tests are needed.

Questions to ask your doctor

- Has my mammogram changed since my last one?
- What changes do you see?
- What do those changes mean?
- If you suggest I come back for a follow-up mammogram, is there harm in waiting?
- If you suggest I have a biopsy, what are the benefits and risks?



Resources

Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)

www.komen.org

Questions to Ask the Doctor

www.komen.org/questions

American Cancer Society

1-800-ACS-2345

www.cancer.org

National Cancer Institute

1-800-4-CANCER

www.cancer.gov

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Biopsy
- Breast Cancer Screening and Follow-up Tests
- Ductal Carcinoma In Situ

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