

Biopsy basics

If you develop a breast lump or other breast change, you may need to have a biopsy. A biopsy is a procedure that removes a sample of cells or tissue from the breast to be tested. The cells or tissue that have been removed are examined under a microscope to look for signs of cancer. A biopsy is generally not painful because a local anesthetic (medicine that blocks pain in the area) is used.

Needle biopsy

Because it is fast and simple, this method is often done first. If your doctor cannot feel the lump, special equipment is used to guide the needle to the area.

Fine needle aspiration (also known as fine needle biopsy) — A thin needle (thinner than a core needle biopsy needle) is used to remove a few cells from the breast lump. It can be done in an outpatient setting and only takes a few minutes.

Core needle biopsy — A thin, hollow needle is used to remove a small amount of tissue. It can be used on both suspicious areas that can be felt and those that can only be seen on a mammogram or MRI. The skin is nicked with a scalpel so the needle can enter. This type of needle biopsy is done in an outpatient setting.

Vacuum assisted biopsy — A thicker, hollow needle removes cores of tissue by means of a single insertion of a vacuum assisted probe. Vacuum assisted breast biopsy is done under a local anesthetic in an outpatient setting. This type of needle biopsy may be done with the guidance of stereotactic mammography or ultrasound imaging.

There are two main types of biopsies: *needle biopsy* and *surgical biopsy*. The method you and your doctor choose depends mainly on the nature and location of the abnormality and your general health and preference.

Most women who have a biopsy are not diagnosed with cancer. About four in five women in the U.S. who have biopsies do not have cancer. Even so, you may want to bring a friend or family member to your biopsy for support and to drive you home.

Surgical biopsy

A surgical biopsy is a surgical procedure that removes the abnormality from the breast. It is done in a hospital or outpatient setting with anesthesia. Most women are able to go home the same day.

Excisional biopsy — The entire lump plus some surrounding normal tissue are removed. This is the most common type of surgical biopsy and the most accurate way to diagnose breast cancer. Although the primary purpose is to diagnose cancer, an excisional biopsy can also be a surgical treatment to remove cancer.



Types of biopsy	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>needle biopsy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fine needle • core needle • vacuum assisted breast biopsy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simple procedure — can be done in an outpatient setting with mammographic or ultrasound guidance • accurate • quicker than open surgical biopsy • local anesthetic is used to prevent pain • less expensive than open surgical biopsy • results available within 48-72 hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surgical biopsy may be necessary • does not remove all of the lump • if needle misses the tumor, an open biopsy will be needed • <i>fine needle only</i>: requires cytopathologist to review the results • <i>fine needle only</i>: cannot fully distinguish non-invasive from invasive cancer
<p>surgical biopsy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • excisional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • takes about an hour • more accurate than needle biopsy • provides more information for treatment plan • removes entire lump • might be the only surgery needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a surgical procedure • more expensive than needle biopsy • possible side effects such as infection or blood collection under the skin, scarring and changes in the breast contour • removing tissue can change the look and feel of the breast

Questions to ask your doctor

What type of biopsy do you recommend?
Why do you prefer this method?

How much of the lump will be removed?

How long will the biopsy take?
Can I go home the same day?

Will I be awake? *(If you are having a surgical biopsy and think you might want a sedative, be sure to bring it up with your doctor.)*

How visible will my scar be? Where will it be?

What possible side effects should I know about?

How soon will I know the results of the biopsy?

How can I get a copy of the pathology report?

Where will my tissue be stored?
How can I access it in the future?

Resources

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Detection
- Breast Surgery
- Mammography
- Prognostic Factors
- Types of Breast Cancer Tumors
- When the Diagnosis is Cancer — An Overview