

What is breast density?

Breast density describes how the breasts look on a mammogram. Breasts are made up of fat and breast tissue (the milk ducts and lobules). In addition, connective tissue helps hold everything in place. Breast density compares the area of breast and connective tissue to the area of fat. Breast and connective tissue are denser than fat and this difference shows up on a mammogram.

- High breast density means there is a greater amount of breast and connective tissue compared to fat.
- Low breast density means there is a greater amount of fat compared to breast and connective tissue.

Young women often have dense breasts. As women get older, their breasts become less dense. After menopause, the breast tissue of most women is replaced by fat. Older women who use menopausal hormones may have higher breast density until they stop using hormones.

Breast density and breast cancer risk

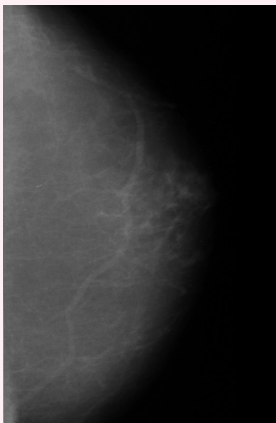
Women with high breast density have an increased risk of breast cancer. However, we don't know why breast density increases risk. It's not clear if lowering breast density would decrease risk. For example, getting older and gaining weight after menopause are both related to a decrease in breast density. However, both are also related to an increase in breast cancer risk. More study is needed in this area.

Screening in women with dense breasts

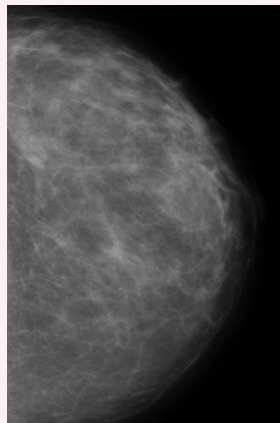
Dense breasts can make it hard to find breast cancer on a mammogram. Dense breast tissue can look white or light gray on a mammogram. Cancer also looks white or light gray.

Today there are no special screening recommendations for women with dense breasts. Women with dense breasts should follow the same breast cancer screening recommendations as other women.

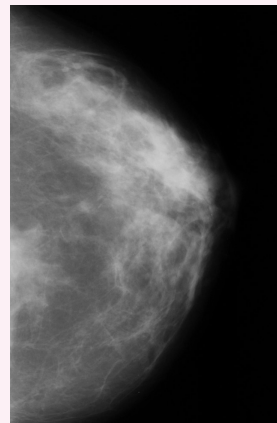
These mammogram images show a range of breast density. Some breasts are mostly fat (fatty breast) and some breasts are mostly breast and connective tissue (dense breast).



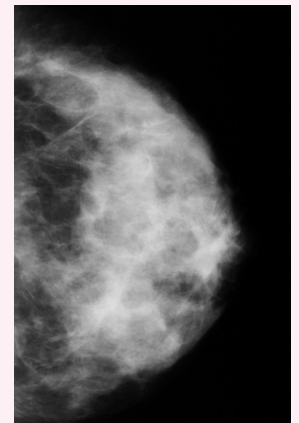
Fatty breast



Some breast density



More breast density



Dense breast

Digital mammography offers screening benefits over film mammography for women with dense breasts. However, most mammography centers now use digital mammography to screen all women.

Breast ultrasound and breast MRI (each in combination with mammography) are being studied to learn whether they improve detection in women with dense breasts compared to mammography alone.

Talking with a doctor

Today, doctors do not routinely use breast density to assess breast cancer risk. While a measure of breast density may be recorded on your mammography report, this measure is not used to assess risk. This is mainly due to the lack of a standard measure of breast density.

Ask your doctor if your mammogram shows you have dense breasts. If so, talk about what other screening tests might be right for you. Breast ultrasound, breast MRI and 3D mammography (each in addition to standard mammography) are being studied to learn whether they improve detection in women with dense breasts compared to standard mammography alone. More research is needed.

Breast density legislation

Some U.S. states require health care providers to notify women found to have dense breasts on a mammogram. This is normally done through a letter in the mail. Although it seems like this information should be helpful, there are no special screening recommendations or guidelines for women with dense breasts at this time. If you have concerns about your breast density, talk with your doctor.

For more information about breast density go to www.komen.org/breastdensity.

Komen's statement on breast density legislation

Susan G. Komen® endorses federal legislation requiring mammography centers to report breast density information to health care providers and patients. Komen believes this legislation will improve the written mammography results providers send to patients. It requires the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to consult with leading cancer organizations (including Komen) in the development of standard wording for these patient reports. The legislation also directs the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to focus research on improving breast cancer screening methods.



Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Screening and Follow-up Tests
- Breast Cancer & Risk

Susan G. Komen® is not a health care provider and does not give medical advice. The information provided in this material is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional.