

What are breast calcifications?

As women get older, they sometimes get tiny bits of calcium in their breast called “calcifications.” They are too small to feel, but can show up on a mammogram 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 and need more testing. For example, tight clusters or lines of tiny calcifications 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 1 in 10 mammograms of women under 50).

Calcifications may be due to older age, past injury or an infection in the breast tissue. They are not due to the amount of calcium in a woman’s diet.

For women treated for breast cancer in the past, calcifications may also be due to past breast surgery or radiation therapy.

Types of calcifications

There are 2 main types of calcifications: macro (see photo A) and micro (see photo B).

- Macrocalcifications look 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 (not cancerous), but can be a sign of breast cancer. Your doctor will note if they have changed over time and follow-up tests may be needed to rule out cancer.

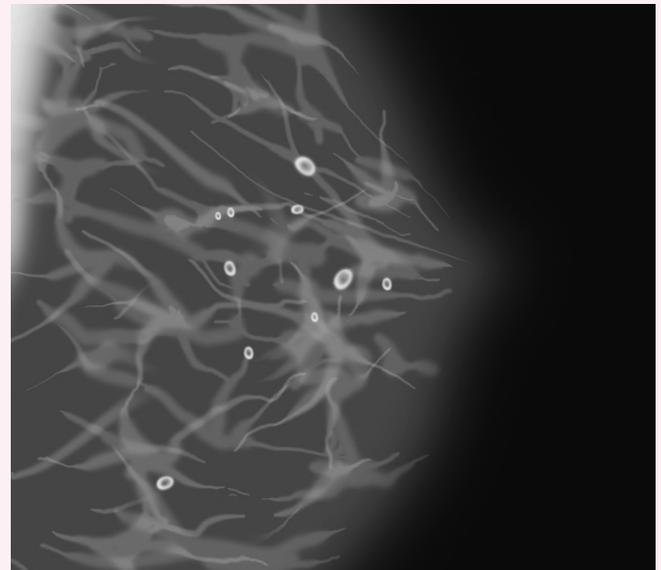


Photo A: Macrocalcifications are large and randomly spread throughout the breast. No follow-up care is needed.

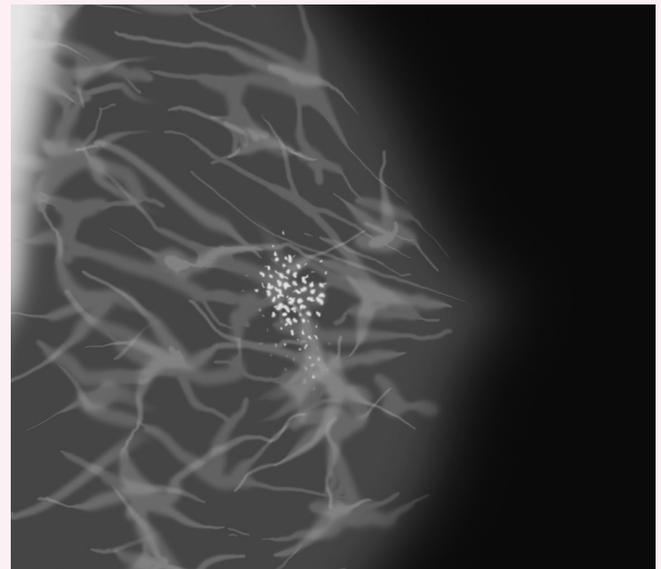


Photo B: Microcalcifications are small, appear clustered. These may be a sign of breast cancer. Follow-up mammograms or a biopsy may be needed.

Suspicious microcalcifications

Sometimes it's hard to tell if microcalcifications are benign or a sign of breast cancer. More images (usually from another mammogram) may be needed. These images help decide if the microcalcifications are benign, probably benign or suspicious for cancer. If they are benign or probably benign, it's likely the area is not cancer. However, if they are suspicious, more follow-up tests are needed.

Questions to ask your doctor

- Does this mammogram look different than 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

The above list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.