

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) of the breast.

Breast cancer is one of the most diagnosed cancers in Ontario. However, more people in Ontario survive breast cancer than almost every other cancer.

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 through regular screening.

Getting checked regularly with mammography (a type of X-ray) is important because it can find cancer early when it is less likely to have spread to other parts of the body. Treatment may also have a better chance of working when breast cancer is found early.

Who should get checked for breast cancer?

The OBSP checks 2 groups of people: those at average risk of getting breast cancer and those at high risk of getting breast cancer.

Average risk: The OBSP recommends that most women, as well as Two-Spirit, trans and nonbinary people ages 50 to 74 who qualify for the program get checked with mammography every 2 years. People in Ontario are eligible if they:

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

* If you notice changes in your breasts or have any concerns, please see your family doctor or nurse practitioner. Most changes are not cancer, but they should be checked right away.

Some people will get checked again in 1 year instead of 2 years based on their medical or family history.

How do I get a mammogram?

Contact your local OBSP site to get a mammogram. To find a site, call 1.800.668.9304 or visit cancercareontario.ca/obsplocations

Eligible people in Ontario ages 50 to 74 can get a mammogram through the OBSP without a referral from a doctor or nurse practitioner.

Breast cancer screening is free for people who are eligible for the OBSP.

Talk to your family doctor or nurse practitioner about your breast screening options.



Ontario Health
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High risk: People ages 30 to 69 who are at high risk of getting breast cancer may be eligible for the High Risk OBSP. People in the High Risk OBSP get screened once a year with mammography and breast MRI (or breast ultrasound if breast MRI is not medically appropriate).

Women, trans and nonbinary people may qualify for screening in the High Risk OBSP if they have certain gene changes, have a higher chance of getting breast cancer based on their family or personal health history, or have had previous radiation therapy to the chest. To find out if you are eligible for the High Risk OBSP, talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner or visit the [Ontario Health \(Cancer Care Ontario\)](https://www.ontariohealth.ca/cancer-care-ontario) website for more information.

How do I get checked for breast cancer?

Mammography (average risk and high risk people)

- Mammography is a test that uses X-rays to make images (mammograms) of the breasts.
- During this test, a medical radiation technologist will place the breast on the mammography machine. A plastic plate will move down slowly to press the breast and hold it in place. There will be some pressure on the breast for a few seconds, much like a tight blood pressure cuff. This pressure does not harm the breast tissue.
- Mammograms are taken of each breast from 2 different angles and appointments usually take about 15 minutes.
- Most people with an abnormal mammogram do not have breast cancer. Someone with an abnormal mammogram needs to get more tests to find out whether they have cancer. The OBSP site will notify your family doctor or nurse practitioner and may also help to schedule a follow-up appointment.

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

Need this information in an accessible format?

1-877-280-8538, TTY 1-800-855-0511, info@ontariohealth.ca

Breast magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) (high risk people only)

- Breast MRI uses radio waves and a magnetic field to make images that can be viewed on a computer.
- Most people getting breast MRIs need to get dye put into their arm through an intravenous (IV) line as part of the test.
- During a breast MRI, people are asked to lie on their stomach.
- Appointments usually take 20 to 60 minutes, depending on the OBSP site.

Mammography is not a perfect test

- It may miss some breast cancers. This is called a “false-negative” result. Some cancers may also grow in the time between screens. This is why regular screening is important.
- Sometimes mammograms are abnormal, but more tests (such as biopsies) may show that there is no cancer. This is called a “false-positive” result.
- It is important to talk with your family doctor or nurse practitioner to understand the benefits and risks of breast cancer screening to determine what tests are right for you.

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 your age, height, genetic makeup, having dense breasts and hormone changes throughout your life (for example, having your period early or starting menopause later). But here are 4 things you can do to lower your chances of getting breast cancer:

- Try not to drink alcohol
- Quit smoking
- Be physically active as part of everyday life
- Have a healthy body weight

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