

Screening for breast cancer

Joining BreastScreen Aotearoa

www.timetoscreen.nz



BreastScreen
Aotearoa

What is breast screening?

Breast screening means having a mammogram to check for early signs of breast cancer. A mammogram is an x-ray that takes a digital picture showing the inside of your breast.



Benefits, risks and harms of breast screening

You can choose whether or not to join BreastScreen Aotearoa and have regular mammograms to check for breast cancer. To help you decide, here is some information on the benefits and risks.

Breast screening could save my life from breast cancer

Breast screening might mean I am diagnosed and treated for a cancer that might never have become life-threatening



Benefits

Screening saves lives

Breast screening saves lives by finding breast cancer early when it can be treated before it grows or spreads.

In New Zealand, women found to have breast cancer following screening with BreastScreen Aotearoa are less likely to die from breast cancer than women who find breast cancer and are not in the screening programme. When comparing women who regularly take part in breast screening to those women who are not screened, screening has reduced deaths from breast cancer by one third¹.

A mammogram helps find cancer as early as possible because it can show changes inside a breast before anything can be felt. You are more likely to survive breast cancer when cancers are found early and are small.

Less treatment

Finding breast cancers early can also mean you need less treatment than if a cancer is found later and is more advanced.

A proven method of finding cancer

In women aged 45 to 69, mammograms can find eight or nine out of ten cancers. It is still important to look for any changes to your breasts between mammograms and talk to your doctor about these immediately.

Regular free checks

It is free to join BreastScreen Aotearoa and have regular mammograms. Every two years you will be sent reminders to make an appointment for your free mammogram.



¹ <https://www.nsu.govt.nz/publications/cohort-and-case-control-analyses-breast-cancer-mortality-breastscreen-aotearoa-1999-2011>

Risks and harms

Some cancers may not harm you

A screening mammogram can find small breast cancers that would not be found if you were not screened. Some of these cancers might never grow big enough during your lifetime to become life-threatening. This is true for up to one-in-ten of the cancers found by breast screening. This is called overdiagnosis.

It is not possible to tell which of these cancers are going to become harmful and which will not, so treatment will be offered for every cancer. You will be able to discuss your treatment options with your specialist.

Mammograms do not find all cancers

A mammogram may look normal even if there is cancer somewhere in a breast. In women 45 to 69 years, about one or two out of ten cancers are not found by mammograms. Finding cancers in breasts has improved since digital mammogram pictures were introduced which show more detail than the old photograph (film) mammograms. Because mammograms can miss some cancers, it is important to be aware of any changes to your breasts between mammograms.

If you notice any changes to your breasts that are not normal for you, see your doctor as soon as possible. Do not wait for your mammogram. These changes may not be cancer but you need to have them checked by your doctor.

Radiation

A mammogram, like all x-rays, exposes a woman to a small amount of radiation but this is unlikely to cause harm. The dose of radiation is smaller with the new digital mammography.

Pain and worry

Breast screening can be uncomfortable or painful for some women as well as worrying.

Can I join BreastScreen Aotearoa?

You can join BreastScreen Aotearoa if you:

- are 45–69 years old
- have no symptoms of breast cancer
- have not had a mammogram in the last 12 months
- are not pregnant or breastfeeding
- are entitled to public health services in New Zealand²
- have been free of breast cancer for five years.

If you are not entitled to join BreastScreen Aotearoa, please talk to your doctor about your personal risk of breast cancer. You should also look for any signs of breast cancer and talk about these with your doctor.

Joining BreastScreen Aotearoa

There are lots of ways to join BreastScreen Aotearoa:

- you can phone us on 0800 270 200
- you can join online at www.timetoscreen.nz
- your doctor may send you a letter inviting you to join
- your doctor or nurse may talk to you about joining
- a Māori or Pacific primary health care organisation or health promotion provider can help you join.

What is a mammogram?

Having a mammogram means having an x-ray of your breast to check for signs of breast cancer. You can have a mammogram at a clinic near you or at one of the BreastScreen Aotearoa mobile units in your area. During a mammogram, each breast is pressed firmly between the plates of the mammogram machine for up to a minute so a clear x-ray picture can be taken.



You will be asked to undress from the waist up and offered a cape or gown to wear.

² For more information on who can receive publicly funded personal health and disability services in New Zealand visit www.moh.govt.nz/eligibility

What is BreastScreen Aotearoa?

BreastScreen Aotearoa provides a free breast screening service to check for breast cancer in women aged 45–69. BreastScreen Aotearoa will invite you to have a free mammogram every two years to check for breast cancer. Mammograms are provided at clinics and BreastScreen Aotearoa mobile units throughout New Zealand.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting women in New Zealand. The risk of getting breast cancer increases as you get older. Three out of four breast cancers are found in women aged 50 or over.

Women who have a family history of breast cancer have a slightly greater chance of developing the disease. However, most of these women do not develop breast cancer. In fact, the majority of women who get breast cancer will have no family history of the disease. This is why it is important for you to be aware of any changes to your breasts and to have regular mammograms.

You can choose whether or not to join BreastScreen Aotearoa and have regular mammograms. You can talk to your doctor or nurse about breast screening or you can find more information on our website www.timetoscreen.nz.

This resource is available from www.healthed.govt.nz or the Authorised Provider at your local District Health Board.
Revised August 2017. 03/2019. **HE1210**

FREEPHONE

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