

What is breast density?

Breast density describes how the breasts look on a mammogram. Breasts are made up of fat and tissue (the milk ducts and lobules, which may be called glandular tissue). Connective tissue helps hold everything in place. Breast density compares the area of breast and connective tissue to the area of fat.

- 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.

Younger 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

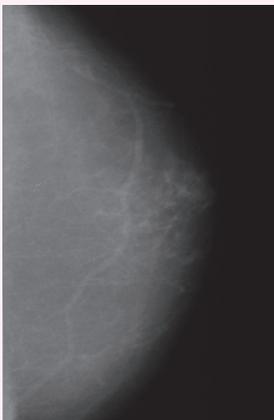
Women with dense breasts have an increased risk of breast cancer. However, we don't know why breast density is linked to breast cancer. It is also not clear that lowering breast density would decrease risk. For example, getting older and gaining weight after menopause are both related to a decrease in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

Screening in women with dense breasts

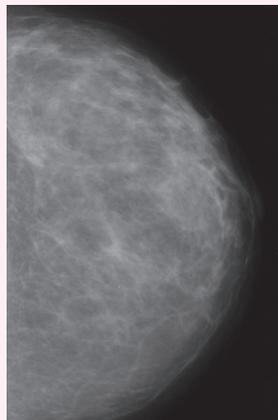
Dense breasts can make it hard to find breast cancer on a mammogram. Dense breast tissue can look white or light gray on a mammogram. Cancer can also look white or light gray.

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.

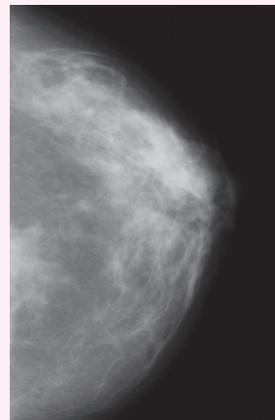
These mammogram images show a range of breast density. Some breasts are mostly fat (fatty breast) and some breasts are mostly breast and connective tissue (dense breast).



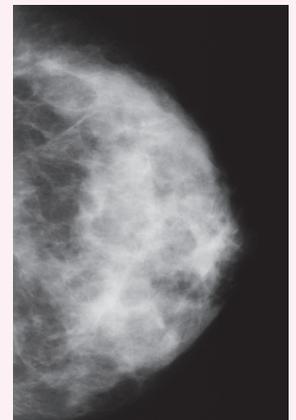
Fatty breast



Some breast density



More breast density



Dense breast

What can I do?

Ask your doctor if your mammogram shows you have dense breasts. If so, talk about what screening tests may be right for you and how often to have them.

How do doctors use breast density?

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.

Some U.S. states require language about breast density be included in mammogram reports. 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 physicians and patients (the "Breast Density and Mammography Reporting Act of 2015"). 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 to focus research on improving breast cancer screening methods.



Related fact sheets in this series:

- Screening and Early Detection
- Breast Cancer Risk Factors
- Mammography

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.