



CALIFORNIA TECHNOLOGY
ASSESSMENT FORUM™

This Guide Will Help You Talk to Your Doctor About:

- What it means to have dense breast tissue
- Your individual breast cancer risk
- The best schedule for regular mammography screening for you
- The importance of digital mammography
- Potential harms and benefits of additional screening

About CTAF:

The California Technology Assessment Forum (CTAF), a flagship initiative of the Institute for Clinical and Economic Review, is dedicated to providing credible, evidence-based information about new and emerging medical technologies and delivery system interventions. Lead funding is provided by the Blue Shield of California Foundation. For more information about CTAF, please visit www.ctaf.org.



Understanding Cancer Screening Options for Women with Dense Breasts

What to do if you have a normal mammogram and are informed you have dense breast tissue

Many women have dense breasts and it is not abnormal. But breast density can make it harder to interpret mammograms and every woman should know more about breast density and the potential risks and benefits of additional screening. The California Technology Assessment Forum (CTAF) reviewed the most up-to-date evidence on screening options for women with dense breasts and recommends the **5 action steps provided below**.

1. Understand what it means to have dense breast tissue and how breast density affects breast cancer screening.

Breasts are made up of different types of tissue that appear differently on your mammogram. Your breasts are considered dense if you have a lot of fibrous or glandular tissue but not much fatty tissue. Having dense

breast tissue is very common – approximately 50% of women have dense breasts. Dense breast tissue makes it more difficult for doctors to spot cancer on mammograms, and may also increase your risk for developing breast cancer, but breast density only has a small impact on your overall risk for developing the disease. You

should not be alarmed if you have dense breasts, but you should seek information about your overall risk for breast cancer and discuss with your doctor what screening options make the most sense for you.

2. Know your overall risk for breast cancer.

Understanding your overall risk for breast cancer can help you make choices about whether you should consider more screening after you get the results of your mammogram. Having dense breast tissue does not mean that you are at “high” risk for developing cancer in your

lifetime. Other risk factors such as age, breast cancer in a first-degree family member (mother, daughter, or sister), certain inherited gene mutations, and lifestyle should also be considered. Talk to your doctor about how to judge your overall risk for breast cancer. Having this knowledge will help you and your doctor decide what the

potential benefits and risks are of additional breast screening tests for you.

Resources for Understanding Your Breast Cancer Risk

American Cancer Society: <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/breastcancer/detailedguide/breast-cancer-risk-factors>

University of California, San Francisco: http://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/breast_cancer_risk_factors/.

Cancer Research, UK: <http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-help/type/breast-cancer/about/risks/definite-breast-cancer-risks>

California Breast Density Information Group: <http://www.breastdensity.info/>

Are You Dense? <http://www.areyoudense.org/>

3. Get your mammogram regularly, based on your doctor's advice.

A third of women who should get regular mammograms do not. For these women, breast cancer may be detected in more advanced stages when it is not as easily treated. Dense breast tissue can make mammograms more difficult to interpret, but it is important that all women with dense breasts continue to receive mammograms at regular intervals, based on their doctor's advice.

4. Seek out digital mammography for your regular mammograms.

The best available evidence suggests that digital mammography is more accurate than film mammography for women with dense breast tissue. Studies found that the risk of missing a small cancer hidden within dense breast tissue is substantially reduced when using the digital test. Most facilities now offer digital mammography so if you have dense breasts and your clinic does not offer digital mammography, you might ask your doctor for a referral to a center that offers this

technology. Always check with your health insurance company first, though, to understand your out-of-pocket costs for screening.

5 Questions to Ask Your Doctor:

How often should I receive screening mammography, and is my test being performed with digital mammography?

What is my overall risk for breast cancer given my breast density, family history, and other factors?

Given my overall risk, what are the potential benefits and the potential risks for me with additional screening?

If more screening is recommended, which screening test has the best evidence to suggest it would be right for me?

Are there important differences in my out-of-pocket costs for the different options?

5. Talk to your doctor about the potential risks and benefits of having additional screening.

There are additional tests that can be used after mammography. These include magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and breast ultrasound. Further screening with these tests find breast cancers that can't be seen on a mammogram, and may find cancers that are smaller and easier to treat. However, further testing also turns up many more findings that are not cancer, leading to added testing and biopsies to investigate something suspi-

cious that ultimately may be a false alarm. Costs are another important issue. Your health insurance policy may not cover additional testing for you, and unnecessary tests increase overall costs in the health system.

Your overall risk for breast cancer is an important piece of the decision about what will be best for you. If your overall risk for breast cancer is low, there is a higher chance that more screening will lead to false alarms rather than finding a cancer. In contrast, for the smaller number

of women who are at high risk of breast cancer, the balance of benefits and risks of additional screening may make more sense. But there is no single right answer. Ask your doctor about your overall risk for breast cancer and discuss your options to help you decide if additional screening is the right choice for you.