

Dense Breasts and Breast Screens

A mammogram report includes information regarding abnormal findings of the breast such as masses, calcifications, or other atypical structures. Reports also include information about breast density. Approximately 50% of women in the United States who have mammograms are diagnosed with dense breasts. Women with dense breasts have an increased risk for breast cancer.

A mammogram screen is the only way to determine a woman's breast density, yet dense breasts make it difficult for mammography screens to detect tumors. Mammography can be accurate in detecting abnormalities in as much as 98% in a fatty breast, yet sensitivity can drop to as low as 30% in women with extremely dense breasts. Depending on a woman's risk factors, supplementary screening with a Breast Ultrasound, (Whole Breast Ultrasound), Molecular Breast Imaging (MBI), or Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) can be an important aid in finding breast cancer.

What are dense breasts?

The breasts are made up of glandular, connective, and fatty tissues. Breast density is a measure of the amount of dense tissue, glandular and connective tissues, compared to less dense tissue, fatty tissue. Breasts that contain a higher proportion of glandular and connective tissues relative to fatty tissue are said to be dense. Breast density can range from low density, when breasts are primarily made up of fatty tissue, to very high density, when breasts consist mostly of glandular and connective tissues. In review of a mammogram screen, a physician can differentiate tissue types based on appearance.

How do doctors classify breast density?

Doctors classify breast density based on what's called the Breast Imaging Reporting and Data System, or BI-RADS. This system divides breast density into four categories:

- A. Breasts almost entirely fatty tissue
- B. Scattered areas of glandular and connective tissues known as "fibroglandular" tissue
- C. Breasts are considered heterogeneously dense. They contain more glandular and connective tissue than fatty tissue. Small tumors may be hidden in mammograms*
- D. Breasts are considered extremely dense. Breast tissue in this category impairs the ability of mammography to detect tumors*

* Breast tissue that falls into categories "C" and "D" are categorized as dense breasts.

Why is it important for women to know if they have dense breasts?

- **Dense breast tissue can make it harder for doctors to detect small tumors in mammograms.** Both tumors and dense breast tissue appear white in mammogram images making it more difficult for doctors to distinguish tumors from dense breast tissue. For women who have dense breast tissue, mammograms may overlook tumors.

- **Women who have dense breasts have a higher-than-average risk of developing breast cancer.**

This risk of breast cancer rises with increasing breast density.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires mammography facilities to inform women whether they have dense breasts and recommend discussing breast density and breast cancer risk with their health care provider.

It's important to note that women with dense breasts and diagnosed with breast cancer are not at higher risk of dying from breast cancer compared to women without dense breasts.

Women diagnosed with dense breasts should continue to get regular screening mammograms and be aware there are additional screening tests that assist providers in detecting tumors that may not be identified by conventional mammography.

What additional breast cancer screenings are available for women who have dense breasts?

- **Breast Ultrasound (Whole Breast Ultrasound).**

This test uses sound waves to produce an image of breast tissues.

- **Molecular Breast Imaging (MBI).**

Molecular breast imaging uses a radioactive tracer and a special camera to make pictures of the breast tissue. The tracer has special material in it to help find areas that may have cancer. The special camera detects any trace that goes to the breast tissue.

- **Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI).**

An MRI uses magnetic fields and radio waves to produce images of breast tissue. A contrast dye is injected into a vein prior to the test. The dye enhances the contrast of tissues in the image which helps doctors better detect tumors.

Will insurance cover additional screening for women with dense breasts?

Contact your insurance company with the procedure codes (CPT codes) and the diagnostic code (ICD-10 Dx code) to discuss your plan's coverage for supplemental breast screening.

If you decide to move forward with one of the screens, please call our office to advise the Front Desk of the name of the screen and the name, phone, and fax number of the facility where you will be scheduling your screening. Per your request, we will submit the order to the facility you have chosen.

Procedure codes (CPT codes):

Bilateral breast MRI: 77049

Molecular breast imaging: 78800

Bilateral whole breast ultrasound: 76641

Diagnostic code: (ICD-10 code or Dx code):

Dense breast tissue: R92.323