

# Mammograms - The Facts

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- ⋈ A mammogram is a very low dose x-ray of the breast tissue that can pick up very small breast cancers<sup>1</sup>.
- ⋈ When a breast cancer is found on a mammogram, it can be as small as two millimetres, such as the size of a grain of rice and is usually not able to be felt at this size<sup>1</sup>.
- ⋈ When a breast cancer is felt, it is on average two to three centimetres in size (the size of a cherry or walnut)<sup>1</sup>.
- ⋈ A mammogram involves the breast being carefully placed by a medical radiation technologist (MRT) between two perspex plates on a mammography x-ray machine; the plates gently compress and spread out the breast tissue folds so as anything abnormal can clearly be seen by the specialist radiologists reading the mammogram x-ray images<sup>1</sup>.
- ⋈ Around 5% of women find mammograms painful<sup>2</sup>. For most women, any discomfort is tolerable and lasts for only a short period.
- ⋈ The radiation dose from a mammogram is very low and is approximately equivalent to the amount of 'natural' background radiation we each receive over a couple of months<sup>3</sup>.
- ⋈ The benefit of a mammogram (meaning early detection of a potentially curable breast cancer) far outweighs any hypothetical increased risk of developing breast cancer as a result of the very small amount of radiation exposure received by a mammogram<sup>4</sup>.
- ⋈ A mammogram can detect 80-90% of breast cancers. Those missed are often in younger women and women with dense breast tissue<sup>5</sup>.
- ⋈ The best way to ensure early detection of breast cancer is to supplement screening mammograms with general breast awareness - know your breasts/know the changes to look and feel for - and see your family doctor without delay, if you notice any changes that are not normal for you<sup>5</sup>.
- ⋈ The New Zealand Government funds BreastScreen Aotearoa, a free national breast screening programme that checks women - 'well' women (without signs/symptoms) - aged 45-69 years for early breast cancer. The programme's aim is to reduce the number of women who die from breast cancer. To enrol phone 0800 270 200<sup>5</sup>.
- ⋈ Screening mammograms do not stop the development of breast cancer, but do reduce the chance of dying from breast cancer by approximately 33%<sup>6</sup>.
- ⋈ Free diagnostic mammograms are available for women with significant breast signs/symptoms and those at very high risk for breast cancer through District Health Boards (DHBs) with a family doctor's referral. Private radiology facilities may also provide mammography services<sup>7</sup>.
- ⋈ Mammography is more effective as a breast cancer screening tool or breast cancer diagnostic tool than breast thermography. A breast thermogram should not be a substitute (adequate replacement) for a screening or diagnostic mammogram<sup>8</sup>.

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## References

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3. National Health Service (UK). [www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breastscreen/faqs.html#thermography](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breastscreen/faqs.html#thermography)
4. Scott, B. (2009, 7 Oct). Mammograms still gold standard test. *NZ Doctor*, p. 26 [www.nzdoctor.co.nz](http://www.nzdoctor.co.nz)
5. Ministry of Health/National Screening Unit/BreastScreening Aotearoa (Revised January 2007). *Having a mammogram every two years improves a woman's chances of surviving breast cancer* (pamphlet). Ministry of Health, Wellington.
6. Ministry of Health/NZHIS (2006). Data is average for 1996-2000 mortality. [www.nzhis.govt.nz](http://www.nzhis.govt.nz)
7. Ministry of Health/National Screening Unit/BreastScreening Aotearoa [www.nsu.govt.nz/Files/BSA/Women\\_breast\\_cancer\\_symptoms2.pdf](http://www.nsu.govt.nz/Files/BSA/Women_breast_cancer_symptoms2.pdf)
8. Ministry of Health/The National Screening Unit, the Cancer Society of New Zealand and The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation (2005, Jan). *Position Statement: The use of thermography as a breast screening or diagnostic tool*. Ministry of Health: Wellington.

\*\*\* Go to The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation's website for further information [www.nzbcf.org.nz](http://www.nzbcf.org.nz), phone toll free 0800 902 732 or email [breasthealth@nzbcf.org.nz](mailto:breasthealth@nzbcf.org.nz)