

Choosing Wisely[®]

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ConsumerReportsHealth



Breast Biopsy

Know your options

A breast biopsy is a test of breast tissue to see if you have cancer. Usually, you get a biopsy if there is a suspicious change in your breast. Your doctor may find the change in a physical exam, mammogram, or ultrasound test.

A breast biopsy is a common procedure for women in the U.S. There are almost a million done each year.

In a biopsy, the doctor removes a small amount of tissue. A biopsy is done with a needle or through surgery. Most of the time, a needle biopsy is the best choice. Here's why:

A needle biopsy is easier on the body.

With a needle biopsy, the breast is not cut. A machine, such as a mammogram, takes pictures of the breast and guides the needle. A very small piece of tissue is taken out through the needle.

During surgical or "open" biopsy, doctors cut the breast. They take out all or part of the suspicious tissue. This can leave a scar that is one- to two-inches long. It can even change the shape of your breast.

With a needle biopsy, you have faster treatment, and better cosmetic results. And you have less worry.



A needle biopsy lets you avoid unneeded surgery.

Most breast biopsies do not show cancer. If you have a needle biopsy and no cancer is found, then you do not need any surgery at all. This is good, because surgery always has risks. It can be painful and inconvenient. And it leaves a permanent scar.

If a needle biopsy does show cancer, you will only need one surgery. But with a surgical biopsy, you will usually need a second surgery.

A needle biopsy has fewer side effects than surgical biopsy.

Side effects of surgery include the following:

- Bleeding
- Wound infection
- Longer recovery
- The need for prescription pain medicine
- Scars (even if there is no cancer)

With needle biopsy, a few women have some bruising. The bruising goes away, and the breast will look normal again.

If surgical biopsy shows cancer, a second surgery adds to stress. Sometimes, having several breast surgeries can change the way the breast looks. You might even need a mastectomy—in which the entire breast is removed.

A needle biopsy costs less.

Surgical biopsies are done in a hospital or surgical center. Your insurance company would pay \$3,303, according to www.HealthcareBlueBook.com. But a core-needle biopsy costs less—about \$483. It is done in a radiology or breast-imaging center, or in the doctor's office.

When should you have a surgical biopsy of the breast?

In some cases, you may need a surgical biopsy. For example, sometimes the imaging machine that guides a needle biopsy cannot easily see the suspicious part of the breast.

However, most women can have a needle biopsy. If your doctor recommends a surgical biopsy, it probably is needed. But don't be afraid to ask why you need it instead of a needle biopsy.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

Ways to help avoid breast cancer

Your lifestyle can affect your risk of getting breast cancer. The steps below may help reduce your risk.

Keep a healthy weight. If you are overweight and past menopause, you may have higher levels of estrogen. This is a hormone that can aid the growth of breast cancer cells.

Eat healthy foods. Diets high in fat and calories can lead to being overweight. Eat mainly fruits, vegetables, poultry, fish, and low-fat dairy products.

Exercise regularly. Women after menopause have less risk of breast cancer if they exercise. A recent study showed that the most active women had the lowest risk. Try to be active at least two and a half hours a week—or 30 minutes a day.

Limit alcohol. The more alcohol you drink, the higher the risk of breast cancer. Even light drinking—such as three to six glasses of wine a week—may increase your risk.

Quit smoking. Long-term heavy smoking may increase the risk of breast cancer. The best aides to quitting are counseling, nicotine-replacement products, and medicines. Or use all three!

Avoid long-term hormone replacement therapy (HRT) after menopause. Avoid HRT that uses estrogen and progesterone. Having HRT for two years or more increases the risk of getting breast cancer. And the cancer is more likely to be advanced when you find it. HRT may also increase the chance of dying from breast cancer. When you stop the HRT, your risk can return to normal in five years.

