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Mammograms before elective breast surgery

When you need the tests—and when you don't

Elective surgery is different from urgent surgery that is needed for an illness or injury. People usually have an elective surgery because they want it. Often, women get breast implants or breast reduction as elective surgery.

Before elective breast surgery, your doctor may order a mammogram. Some doctors want to check for cancer, even if you have a low risk or recently had a mammogram.

But most women don't need mammograms before elective breast surgery. This is especially true for women under age 40 and women who are already getting the mammograms they need. Here's why:

Mammograms may not be accurate in younger women.

Mammograms can find breast cancer in its early stages, especially in women who are older than 50.

But in younger women, especially under age 40, mammograms are not as accurate. Many younger women have dense breast tissue. This makes it harder to study the mammogram. The results are less accurate.



Mammograms can lead to follow-up tests that may be unnecessary and stressful.

If anything looks unusual on your mammogram, your doctor might order more tests. You might get imaging tests and a biopsy. During a biopsy, sample tissue or cells are removed and tested for cancer. In younger women, biopsy results are usually normal. That's because breast cancer is not common in women under age 40.

These tests can cause a lot of stress. You probably don't need them if you are already following the advice on the next page.

Mammograms expose you to radiation.

Mammograms are X-rays, which expose you to radiation. Your risk is small in a single mammogram. However, having many X-rays can be a serious risk for cancer. Sometimes, doctors order several more mammograms after you get an unusual mammogram result.

Mammograms and follow-up tests can cost a lot.

Insurance usually pays for the mammograms recommended in the Advice column on this page. But the test may not be covered for elective surgery.

A mammogram costs about \$250. There are more costs if you have follow-up tests, like ultrasound and breast MRIs. Breast biopsies can be even more expensive. Different kinds of biopsies cost from \$250 to over \$2,000. You may also lose workdays.

When do you need a mammogram before elective breast surgery?

You only need a mammogram before breast surgery if:

- You are not up to date on your recommended mammograms. See the Advice column.
- Your doctor finds something unusual or abnormal during your breast exam.

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

When should women have a mammogram?

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends that:

- **Women age 50 to 75** should have mammograms every two years.
- **Women in their 40s, or age 75 and older** should talk to their doctors. They should ask if the test has more benefit or harm, based on their risk factors.
- **Women younger than 40** should consider testing only if they are at high risk. Breast cancer is uncommon in this age group.

Talk to your doctor.

You may need to get tests more often if you have personal risks for breast cancer. Talk to your doctor if you have any of these risks:

- You have had breast cancer or a breast condition that can lead to breast cancer.
- You have a genetic risk. For example, you have the BRCA mutation. Or your sister, mother, or aunt has had breast cancer.
- Your menstrual periods started before age 12 or continued after age 55.
- You did not have a child before age 30.
- You are taking post-menopausal hormone replacement therapy.
- You are obese.
- You drink a lot of alcohol.
- You smoke.

