



*Information for
women under 45
years of age*



BreastScreen Aotearoa is a free national breast screening programme that checks for early breast cancer. The programme offers free mammograms (breast X-rays) every two years to women aged 45–69 years who have no symptoms of breast cancer.

The earlier a cancer is detected, the better the chance of successful treatment and recovery.

What about women under 45?

If you are under 45 years old, you may be wondering why the free national programme does not include you.

Studies clearly show that when women aged 50 years and over are invited to have mammograms every two years as part of a screening programme, their risk of death from breast cancer is reduced by about a third. For women aged 45–49 years, the risk of death from breast cancer is reduced by about a fifth.

Research shows that mammograms are not as good at detecting breast cancers and saving lives in younger women, particularly before the menopause. While mammograms can detect cancer in your age group, there are some drawbacks to having mammograms if you are under 45. In this age group, breast tissue may be denser. This makes the mammogram harder to read, and cancers are more likely to be missed. As well as this, women under 45 are more likely to have something show up on their mammogram that needs checking but turns out not to be cancer. For further information on the harms and benefits of screening in young women visit www.breastscreen.govt.nz

What if I have a family history of breast cancer?

Women with a family history of breast cancer may have a greater risk of getting the disease. The risk can vary depending on the number of relatives affected and the age of the relative(s) when their breast cancer was found. However, even among women with a high risk, most will not develop breast cancer. You can discuss your risk with your doctor.

Can some women under 45 years have free mammograms?

Yes, mammograms are still an important part of checking breast symptoms (for example, a breast lump or change) in women under 45 years of age.

Some women under 45 years who are at a greater than average risk of getting breast cancer and do not already have a breast problem or symptom can have free mammograms at a public hospital if they have one (or more) of the following:

- a mother or sister who developed breast cancer before menopause or developed cancer in both breasts
- a previous breast cancer
- a previous biopsy of breast tissue showing an 'at-risk lesion'.

These mammograms will not be part of the BreastScreen Aotearoa programme. You must be referred by a doctor.

How can I check for breast cancer?

It is important for all women (whether or not they are having mammograms) to get to know what their breasts are like normally. If you feel or notice anything that is not usual for you, have it checked by your doctor.

What should I look for?

The most common sign of breast cancer is a lump or thickening. However, most lumps are not cancer.

Possible signs of breast cancer are:

- a new lump or thickening
- a change in breast shape or size
- pain in the breast that is unusual
- puckering or dimpling of the skin
- any change in one nipple, such as:
 - a turned-in nipple
 - a discharge that occurs without squeezing
- a rash or reddening of the skin that appears only on the breast.

While these signs may not be cancer, you need to check them with your doctor, even if you've recently had a mammogram. Women of any age with breast cancer symptoms can have free mammograms at a public hospital with a doctor's referral.

About 10 percent of women in New Zealand will develop breast cancer. Put the other way, over 90 percent will not develop breast cancer. Breast cancer can occur in women under the age of 45, but it is uncommon. It becomes more common for all women as they grow older. Three-quarters of women diagnosed with breast cancer are 50 years or older.

How can I join the programme when I'm 45?

You can ring Freephone 0800 270 200 or visit www.breastscreen.govt.nz Your doctor or a health promoter may refer you with your consent.

REMEMBER:

*Women of any age
who feel or notice
anything unusual
about their breasts,
at any time,
should see their doctor.*