

Breast screening

Breast screening is the best method for detecting breast cancer in its earliest stages. Early detection offers the best chance of successful treatment and recovery. Screening mammograms use low dose x-rays of the breasts to detect cancers that are too small to be felt by you or your doctor.

Two-yearly mammography screening is most effective for women aged 50 to 69 years. Most women who have abnormal mammogram results don't have cancer.

Breast cancer in Australia

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Australian women. One in nine women will develop breast cancer by the age of 85 years. In Victoria, around 3,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. In 2006 more than 660 Victorian women died from breast cancer, making it the second most common cause of cancer-related death in women after lung cancer.

Free breast screening

BreastScreen Australia is a government-funded, national breast cancer screening program that provides high-quality mammography screening, particularly for women aged between 50 and 69 years. Women in this age group who attend BreastScreen are routinely re-invited for screening every two years. Screening mammography finds most cancers present at the time of the mammogram although, like other medical tests, it is not 100 per cent accurate.

BreastScreen Victoria, which delivers breast screening services in Victoria, is an accredited part of BreastScreen Australia. Breast screening is provided free of charge, including initial screening mammograms and any further tests and assessment that may be needed to investigate an abnormal result.

If you have had breast cancer in the past, talk over screening options with your specialist, as the screening program may not be suitable for you.

Screening mammograms

A screening mammogram is a low dose x-ray of your breasts, used to detect unsuspected cancer at an early stage before symptoms appear. The mammogram is carried out by a radiographer. The mammogram provides a picture of the inside of your breast. The picture is then examined by a radiologist, who is trained to detect any abnormalities. Research has shown that regular mammography screening in women aged between 50 and 69 years can reduce deaths from breast cancer by up to one-third.

The BreastScreen program invites women aged between 50 and 69 years to have a free screening mammogram every two years. Women aged between 40 and 49 years or 70 and over may also be screened if they wish, but are not actively invited to the program and do not receive two-yearly reminder letters. Evidence indicates that breast screening is most effective in women aged 50 to 69 years.

Screening a whole population of women in a particular age group who do not have symptoms is different from the use of mammography to investigate symptoms in an individual woman. This is a diagnostic procedure. If you experience any symptoms or unusual changes in your breasts, see your doctor for diagnosis as soon as possible.

What to expect from a mammogram

While the mammogram is being taken, each breast will be compressed between two flat plates on the X-ray machine. Compressing the breast only lasts for a few seconds. Some women may experience discomfort, however, if you experience pain during the mammogram, you should let the radiographer know. You can also ask for the procedure to stop at any time. It is recommended that you advise your radiographer if you have sensitive breasts. She will work with you to make sure that the mammogram is as comfortable as possible.

Further tests

Most women will only ever visit BreastScreen Victoria to have their regular screening mammograms. However, sometimes an abnormal result indicates that further investigation is needed. If you have an abnormal result, BreastScreen Victoria will ask you to visit your nearest assessment centre. A multidisciplinary team will assess the results then undertake further tests and a clinical examination (at no cost to you). If you are contacted to attend an assessment centre following your screening mammogram, it is important that you do so at the earliest available appointment time. Remember, most women called back for further tests are found **not** to have breast cancer.

BreastScreen services in Victoria

There are eight BreastScreen Victoria regional services and each has an assessment centre and one or more screening centres. There are almost 40 screening centres across Victoria. Two mobile screening vans also service 28 rural and urban communities on a regular basis to ensure all women can access screening, regardless of where they live. Female radiographers are always available. To make an appointment, call 13 20 50.

If you are outside the eligible age group, you can ask for a referral from your doctor to access mammography at public and private diagnostic imaging services.

Accreditation process ensures high standards

The effectiveness of BreastScreen Australia depends on maintaining high standards in all areas of service delivery. All breast screening services have to meet national accreditation standards, which have been developed by professionals involved with the program. The accreditation process means that women can be confident that their mammography screening service meets national standards, no matter where they attend.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- BreastScreen Victoria Tel. 13 20 50

Things to remember

- BreastScreen Australia offers free mammograms to women aged between 50 and 69 years.
- Women aged between 40 and 49 years or 70 and over may also be screened if they wish.
- Early detection and treatment can reduce illness and death from breast cancer.
- If you experience any breast symptoms or unusual changes, see your doctor without delay.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

BreastScreen Victoria

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