

Breast Density and Your Breast Mammogram Report

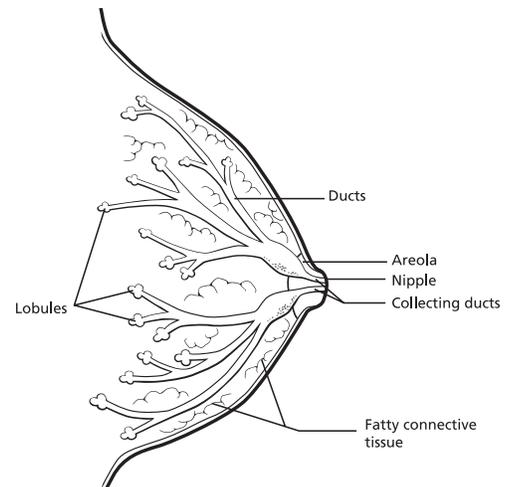


When you had your last mammogram, your report may have said that you have dense breast tissue. If so, you're probably wondering what this means.

What is dense breast tissue?

Breasts are made up of a mixture of lobules, ducts, and fatty and fibrous connective tissue. Lobules produce milk, and ducts are the tiny tubes that carry milk from the lobules to the nipple. The breast lobules are sometimes called glandular tissue because they produce milk. The fibrous connective tissue and the fatty tissue give breasts their size and shape and hold the glandular tissue in place.

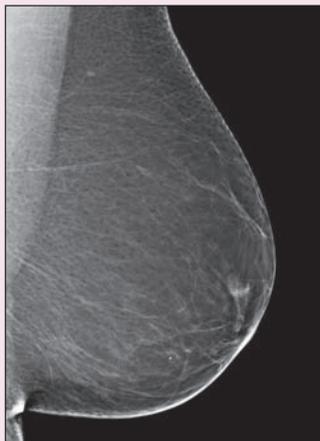
Your breasts are considered dense if you have a lot of fibrous or glandular tissue but not much fatty tissue. Some women have more dense breast tissue than others for reasons we do not clearly understand. For most women, breast density decreases with age. But in some women, there is little change. Breast density is very common in many women, and it is not abnormal.



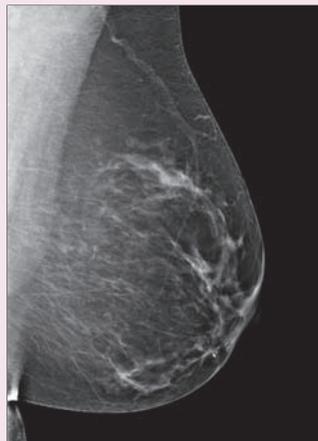
How do I know if I have dense breasts?

Breast density can be determined only by mammograms. It is not related to breast size or firmness. You may think that because your breasts are firm, they are dense; but breast density is not determined by how your breasts feel.

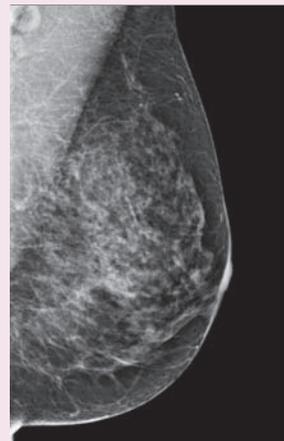
When the radiologist looks at your mammogram, they determine your breast density. There are four categories of breast density. They go from almost all fatty tissue to extremely dense and very little fatty tissue. The radiologist decides which of the four categories (below) best describes your level of breast density.



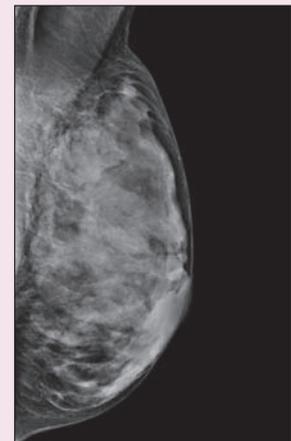
1. Breast is almost all fatty tissue.



2. Some glandular and fibrous tissue present.



3. More glandular and fibrous tissue present. This can make it hard to see small masses.



4. Breast is almost all glandular and fibrous. A small mass could be missed here.

Some mammogram reports sent to women contain information about breast density. This information may be worded in a language that is easier to understand instead of using the numbers 1 to 4. Women whose mammograms show 3 or 4 breast density may be told that they have “dense breasts.”

Why is breast density important?

Having dense breast tissue may increase your risk of getting breast cancer. Women who have dense breast tissue (3 or 4) have a higher risk of breast cancer compared to women with less dense breast tissue (1 or 2).

We are not certain at this time what it is about dense breast tissue that increases a woman's risk of breast cancer. We know there are many risk factors for breast cancer – starting menstrual periods early and having a late menopause, first pregnancy after age 30, personal history of breast cancer, family history of breast cancer – just to name a few. The two most important risk factors though are being a female and getting older.

Some risk factors put women at higher risk for breast cancer. For example, women who have a breast cancer gene are at high risk for the disease. Women at high risk should have magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in addition to their yearly mammograms.

Women with dense breast tissue (3 or 4) are at moderate risk for breast cancer. MRIs are not recommended for women at moderate risk based on what is known today.

Dense breast tissue also makes it harder for doctors to see cancer on mammograms. On mammograms, dense breast tissue looks white, and breast masses or tumors also look white. So, the dense tissue can hide tumors. Fatty tissue looks almost black, and something white, such as a tumor, can be easily seen. So, mammograms can be less accurate in women with dense breasts.

If I have dense breasts, do I still need a mammogram?

Yes. Most breast cancers can be seen on a mammogram even in women who have dense breast tissue. So, it is still important for you to get regular

mammograms. And we know that mammograms save women's lives.

Even with a normal mammogram report, women should be familiar with their breasts and know how they normally look and feel. At any time, if a woman feels or sees something that isn't normal, she should report this breast change to her doctor without delay.

Are there any other tests that I should have if I have dense breast tissue?

In breasts that are dense, cancer can be hard to see on a mammogram. Studies have shown that ultrasound and MRIs can help find breast cancers that can't be seen on a mammogram. However, both MRI and ultrasound show more findings that are not cancer. These can result in more tests and unnecessary biopsies. And the cost of ultrasound and MRI may not be covered by insurance.

What should I do if I have dense breast tissue?

If your mammogram report says that you have dense breast tissue, talk with your doctor about what this means for you. Be sure that your doctor or nurse knows your medical history and whether there is anything in your history that increases your risk for getting breast cancer.

This is not something that needs to be done immediately, unless, of course, you will feel better having talked with your doctor or nurse.

At this time, experts do not agree what other tests, if any, should be done in addition to mammograms in women with dense breasts. After talking with your doctor, you may choose to have other tests.

Women who are already in a high-risk group (based on gene mutations, a strong family history of breast cancer, or other factors) should have an MRI along with their yearly mammogram.

For more information on breast cancer risk factors and whether you are in a higher-risk group for breast cancer, please call us at 1-800-227-2345.



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