

Breast Density and Your Mammogram Report

Regular mammograms are the best way to find breast cancer early. But if your mammogram report says that you have dense breast tissue, you may be wondering what that means.

What is dense breast tissue?

Breast density is a measure of how much fibrous and glandular tissue (fibroglandular tissue) is in your breast, as compared to fat tissue. It isn't related to breast size or firmness and cannot be felt.

- Glandular tissue is made up of lobules and ducts. The lobules produce milk. The ducts carry the milk from the lobules to the nipple.
- Fibrous tissue and fat give breasts their size and shape and support the other structures.

Fibrous and glandular tissue are harder to see through on a mammogram, so your breast tissue may be called “dense” if you have a lot of these tissues (and not as much fat). Having dense breast tissue is normal and common. Some women have denser breasts than others.

How do I know if I have dense breasts?

Your mammogram is reviewed by a radiologist, a doctor who “reads” mammograms. They check your mammogram for changes, and they also look at breast density.

There are four types of breast density. They range from almost all fatty tissue to extremely dense tissue with very little fat. The radiologist decides which of the four types best describes how dense your breasts are. People whose breast density falls into categories C or D have dense breasts. About half of women in the United States who have mammograms have dense breasts.

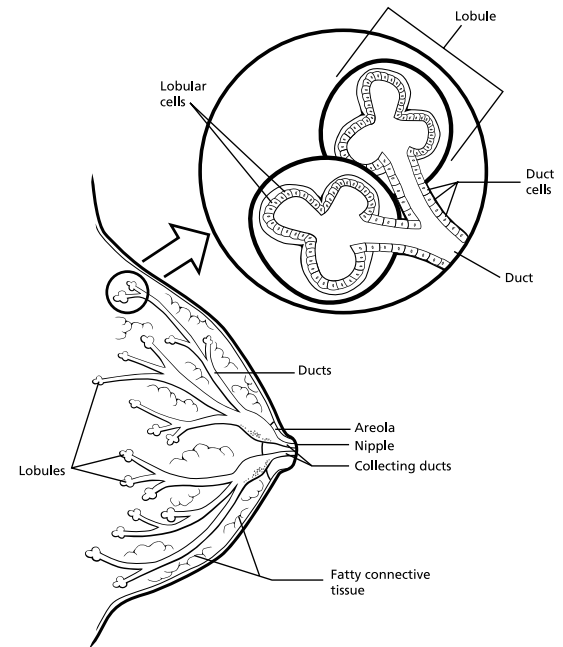
Breast density types

- **Category A:** Breasts are almost all fatty tissue.
- **Category B:** There are scattered areas of dense glandular and fibrous tissue (seen as white areas on the mammogram).
- **Category C:** More of the breast is made of dense glandular and fibrous tissue. This can make it hard to see small masses in or around the dense tissue, which also appear as white areas.
- **Category D:** Breasts are extremely dense, which makes it hard to see masses or other findings that may appear as white areas on the mammogram.

Breast density reporting

As of September 2024, all mammogram reports sent to patients must include information about breast density, which should be described as either “not dense” or “dense.”

If your breast tissue is not dense, the report will say, “Breast tissue can be either dense or not dense. Dense tissue makes it harder to find breast cancer on a mammogram and also raises the risk of developing breast cancer. Your breast tissue is not dense. Talk to your health care provider about breast density, risks for breast cancer, and your individual situation.”



If your breast tissue is dense, the report will say, “Breast tissue can be either dense or not dense. Dense tissue makes it harder to find breast cancer on a mammogram and also raises the risk of developing breast cancer. Your breast tissue is dense. In some people with dense tissue, other imaging tests in addition to a mammogram may help find cancers. Talk to your health care provider about breast density, risks for breast cancer, and your individual situation.”

Why is breast density important?

Women who have dense breasts have a higher risk of breast cancer than women with less dense breasts. It’s unclear why dense breasts are linked to breast cancer risk. It may be that dense breasts have more cells that can change into abnormal cells.

Dense breast tissue makes it harder for radiologists to see cancer on mammograms. Dense breast tissue looks white on a mammogram. Breast masses and cancers can also look white, so the dense tissue can make it harder to see them. Since fatty tissue looks almost black on mammograms, it’s easier to see a tumor that looks white when most of the breast is fat.

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 breasts. So getting regular mammograms can help find cancer early when treatment is more likely to be successful.

Even if your mammogram is normal, know how your breasts normally look and feel. And report any change to your doctor right away.

Should I have any other screening tests if I have dense breast tissue?

Experts do not agree on whether other tests, if any, should be done along with mammograms in women with dense breasts.

Digital or 3D mammograms can find some cancers not seen on regular (2D) mammograms. Some studies suggest that 3D mammography might be helpful in women with dense breasts. It can be used as a screening test along with or instead of standard mammography. But not all imaging centers have this test available yet.

Studies have shown that breast ultrasound and maybe magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) might help find some breast cancers that can’t be seen on mammograms. But ultrasound and MRI can also show changes that are not cancer. This can lead to more tests and biopsies that might not be needed. And insurance may not cover the cost of ultrasound or MRI.

What should I do if I have dense breast tissue?

If you have dense breasts, talk with your doctor about what this means for you. Be sure that your doctor or nurse knows if there’s anything in your medical history that may increase your risk for getting breast cancer.

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



To learn more about dense breast tissue and your mammogram report, visit the American Cancer Society website at cancer.org/densebreasts or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We’re here when you need us.

