

Breast Density and Screening



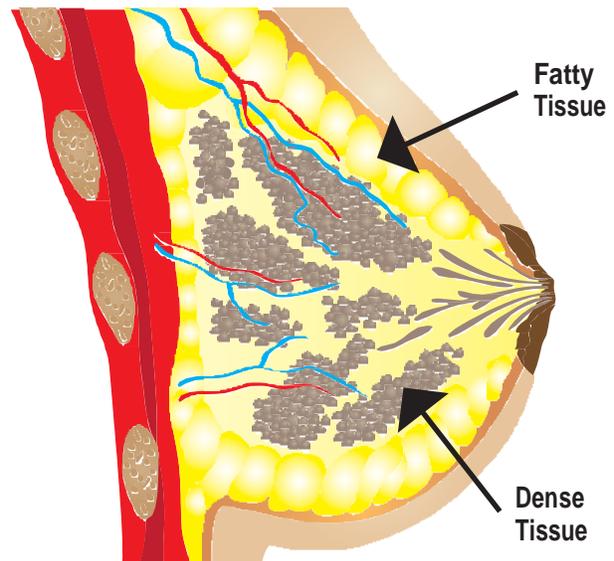
What is this Booklet About?

This is a guide to help you understand breast density and how it may affect you. Having dense breasts is very common. It's only one of many factors that can help determine your risk of developing breast cancer. If you have dense breasts, we recommend that you talk with your healthcare provider to learn more about this.

What Is Breast Density?

The breast is made up of dense tissue and non-dense (fat) tissue. Breast density is the amount of dense tissue compared to the amount of fat in the breast. In other words, the more dense tissue you have the higher your breast density is.

There are 4 categories of density, ranging from entirely fatty to extremely dense. When you have your mammogram (x-ray of the breast) done the radiologist (x-ray specialist) measures the density of your breast and decides on the category.

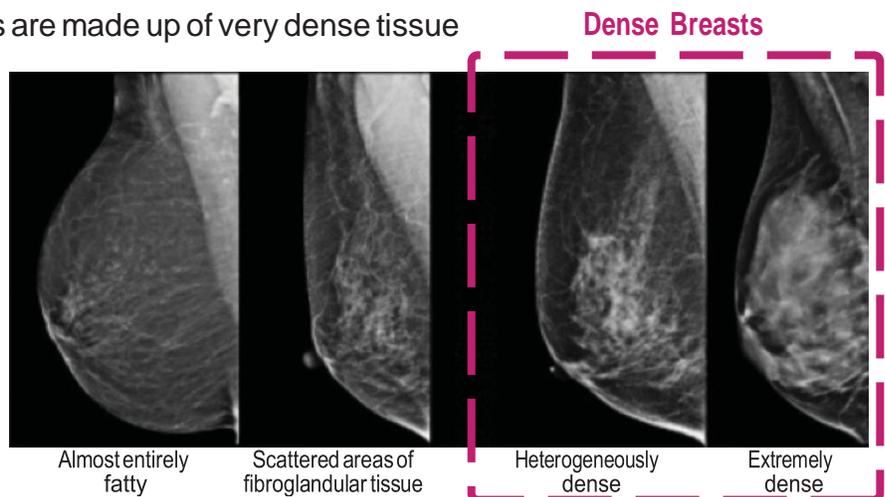


What Is Normal Breast Density?

Breast density is typically put into 1 of 4 groups:

- Fatty: The breasts are almost entirely fat
- Scattered areas of fibroglandular density: The breasts have scattered areas of density
- Heterogeneously dense: The breasts have a fair bit of dense tissue
- Extremely dense: The breasts are made up of very dense tissue

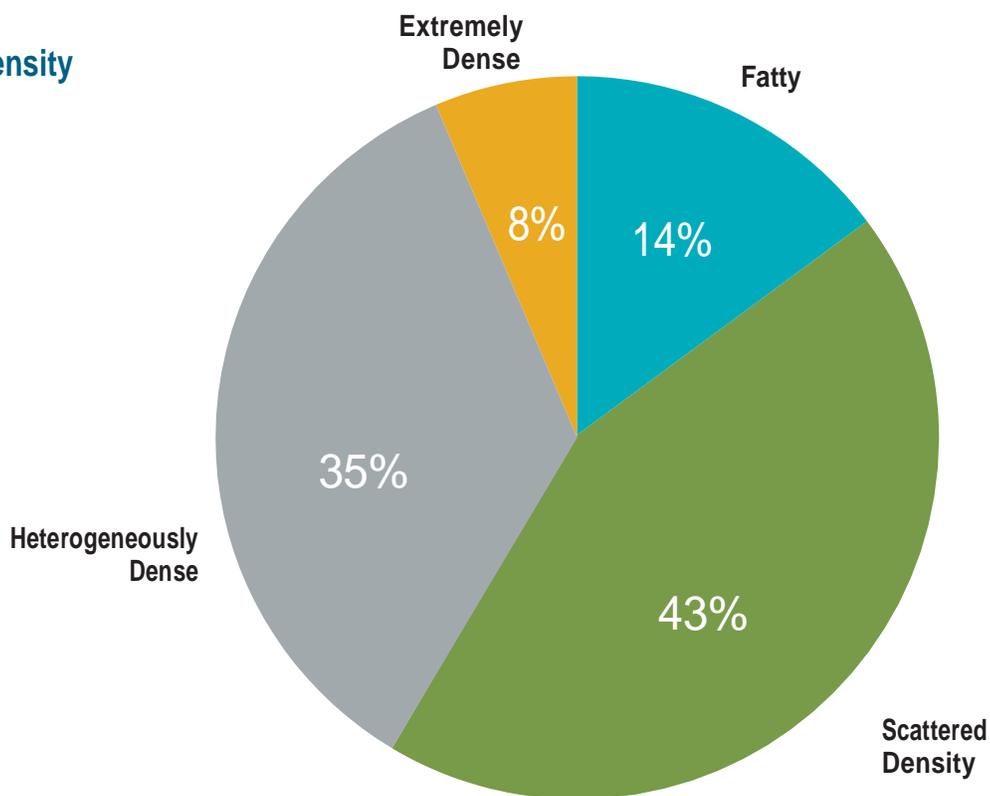
Most women's breast density is in the B or C category. However, breast density typically gets lower as you age.



The term 'dense breasts' usually refers to breasts that are in category C (heterogeneously dense) or D (extremely dense). Below shows how many women, who are 40 or older, were in each breast density category in Alberta in 2016. As you can see, almost half of these women have dense breasts.

- a. Fatty: 14% (or just over 1 in 10)
- b. Scattered Density: 43% (or just over 4 in 10)
- c. Heterogeneously Dense: 35% (or just under 4 in 10)
- d. Extremely Dense: 8% (or just under 1 in 10)

Types of Breast Density



Remember: It's very common to have dense breast tissue. There are many things that may affect your breast density like genetics, hormone levels, and overall body fat.

Breast density can change and tends to go down as you age.



How Do I Know If My Breasts Are Dense?

Breast density isn't something that you can tell by the size, look, or feel of the breasts. The only way to find out is to have a mammogram. As part of your mammogram, your radiologist decides which category your breast tissue is in based on the amount of dense tissue seen on the mammogram. They may also use a special computer program to help assess your breast density. Breast density changes as you get older so it can be different from one mammogram to the next.

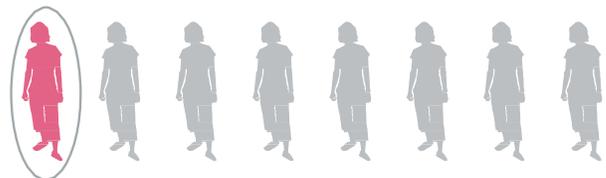
If you'd like to know your breast density, you can talk to your healthcare provider when you review the results together.



Remember: Breast density can't be determined by the size, look, or feel of your breasts. Having large breasts doesn't mean that they can't also be dense.

Why Are Dense Breasts a Concern?

Dense breasts are one of many possible risk factors for developing breast cancer. Women in Alberta have a 1 in 8 chance of developing breast cancer in their lifetime.

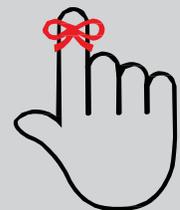


Research to date shows that women with dense breasts are diagnosed with breast cancer about 1-2 times more often than average. However, keep in mind that other factors, such as age and genetics, have a bigger impact on your overall risk of breast cancer.

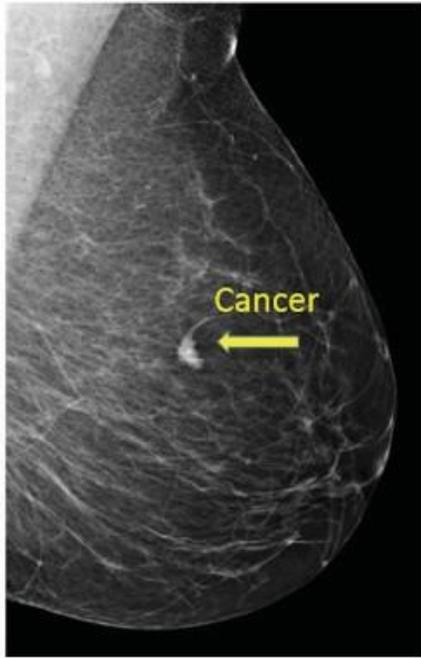
Note: You might find different numbers used elsewhere. There are a few reasons for this:

- 1) Numbers differ slightly depending on the study.
- 2) Often the difference in risk is shown by comparing the risk for women with the greatest breast density to those with the least. This does not represent most women with dense breasts and does not tell you how that risk compares to the average.
- 3) Breast density changes over time and it is unclear how it impacts lifetime risk.

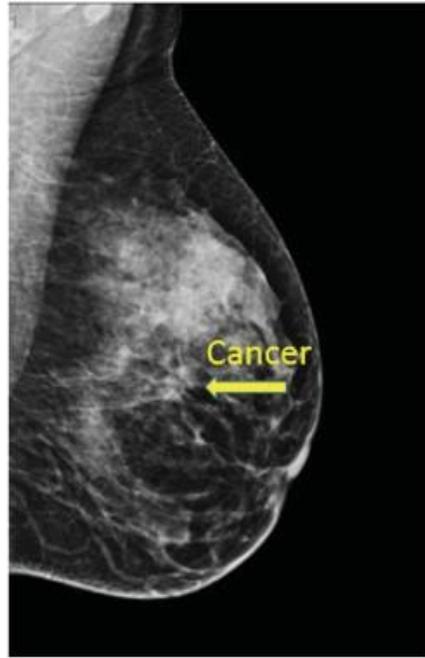
Remember: Having dense breasts does not mean that you will get cancer. It's only one of many recognized risk factors. Other risk factors can include your age, family history, alcohol use, and many others.



Dense breasts can also make it more difficult to spot cancer on a mammogram. Dense tissue can show up as white on a mammogram, the same colour as many kinds of breast cancer. The image below shows how cancer can be harder to spot in dense breast tissue compared to fatty breast tissue.



Fatty



Dense



Remember: Dense breasts can make cancer harder to spot but radiologists are also well trained to spot seemingly hidden cancers. If you have a first screening test early it gives the radiologist something to compare future tests to.

This helps them tell what needs further testing and what doesn't.

What Should I Do If I Find out I Have Dense Breasts?

Talk to your healthcare provider about what breast density means for you and your risk level. Regardless of your breast density, a mammogram is recommended for women who are 50 to 74 years old. This is the best way to find cancer early. Sometimes screening more often may be needed. You may also be offered other tests such as an ultrasound (test using high frequency sound waves), in addition to your mammogram, to help find breast cancer when there's dense tissue. There are risks with each type of test. For example, with an ultrasound you may have a higher chance of finding a cancer if you have dense breasts but it can also show a false positive more often. This could lead to more testing when no cancer is actually present. It's important for you to talk to your healthcare provider about all of your options so you can make the decision that is right for you.



Remember: Screening more often or having other tests may make your chance of finding cancer better. However, screening more often may also put you at higher risk of the possible harms of screening. For more information on the benefits and risks of screening see the 'Making an Informed Decision About Breast Cancer Screening' booklet on the screeningforlife.ca website.

Talk to your healthcare provider to find out how these benefits and risks apply to you.

If I Don't Have Dense Breasts, Should I Still Screen?

Yes. If you don't have dense breasts you'll get the most benefit from screening with a mammogram. Breast cancer is easier to see in breasts that don't have dense tissue. Talk with your healthcare provider about what is right for you and how often to get a screening mammogram. For more information about breast cancer screening visit our website at www.screeningforlife.ca and click on "Breast" then select a specific topic to learn about. If you can't access the website, you can also call us at the number on the last page of this booklet.

What Other Resources Are There?

Talk to your healthcare provider to learn more about breast density and how it affects you. Below are some resources you may find useful. Guidelines may not be the same in other provinces so some of the suggestions may be slightly different.

Canadian Cancer Society

www.cbcf.org/ontario/AboutBreastHealth/KnowYourRisk/Pages/Breast-Density.aspx

Alberta Health Services

https://screeningforlife.ca/breast/breast-cancer/#breast_density

BC Cancer Screening

www.bccancer.bc.ca/screening/breast/breast-health/breast-density

Ontario Breast Screening Program

<https://archive.cancercare.on.ca/common/pages/UserFile.aspx?fileId=332094>

Contact Us

You are welcome to contact us anytime if you have questions or want general information about any of the cancer screening programs.

Phone:

1-866-727-3926

Address:

2210-2nd Street SW, Calgary Alberta, T2S 3C3

Office Hours:

Monday to Friday 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM

Out of Province inquiries:

403-355-3260 (long distance charges will apply)

Website:

www.screeningforlife.ca