

# Screening for breast cancer

Joining BreastScreen Aotearoa

[TimeToBreastScreen.nz](http://TimeToBreastScreen.nz)



BreastScreen  
Aotearoa

## Breast screening and cancer

Breast screening means having a mammogram every 2 years to check for early signs of breast cancer, the most common cancer affecting women in New Zealand.

Screening saves lives by finding breast cancers before there are even any symptoms. Most breast cancers are curable if found and treated early before they can grow or spread.

### What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is a type of x-ray. It is a digital picture that shows the inside of your breast to check for any signs of breast cancer.



During a mammogram, each breast is pressed firmly between two plates for up to a minute so clear pictures can be taken. You will be asked to undress from the waist up and offered a cape or gown to wear.

Mammograms are done at clinics and mobile units throughout New Zealand.

**Early detection is your best protection.**

## What is BreastScreen Aotearoa?

**BreastScreen Aotearoa is a free national breast screening programme that checks for early breast cancer.**

The national programme currently offers free mammograms (breast x-rays) every 2 years to eligible women aged 45 to 69\* who have no symptoms of breast cancer.

\*This age range will be extended over time so that women can continue screening until they turn 75.

Information will be added to **TimeToBreastScreen.nz** to explain the changes.

We are aiming for these changes to apply to women who:

- turn 70 from 1 October 2024 (are born on or after 1 October 1954), if their screening region falls within the Nelson Marlborough district area.
- turn 70 from 1 October 2025 (are born on or after 1 October 1955), once the age extension has been implemented in their screening regions.

## Am I eligible?

You are eligible to participate in BreastScreen Aotearoa if you:

- are a woman aged 45 to 69
- have no symptoms of breast cancer
- have not had a mammogram in the last 12 months
- are not pregnant or breastfeeding
- are entitled to public health services in New Zealand<sup>1</sup>
- have been free of breast cancer for 5 years.

If you are not eligible, talk with your doctor or hauora provider about your personal risk of breast cancer. Also look for any signs of breast cancer and talk with your healthcare provider as soon as possible if you notice changes to your breasts.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on who can receive publicly funded personal health and disability services in New Zealand, visit [tewhatauora.govt.nz/our-health-system/eligibility-for-publicly-funded-health-services/](https://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/our-health-system/eligibility-for-publicly-funded-health-services/)

## Joining BreastScreen Aotearoa and booking your mammograms

There are lots of ways to join BreastScreen Aotearoa:

- You can phone us on **0800 270 200**
- You can join online at **TimeToBreastScreen.nz**
- Your doctor or nurse may talk to you about joining.

### It's your choice

You can choose whether to participate in BreastScreen Aotearoa. You can ask to opt out of the programme at any time. You can also ask to rejoin at any time.

If you decide not to participate in the programme, you or your healthcare provider can still arrange your mammograms, but they may not be free and results will not be recorded with BSA.

To help you decide, more information is provided in this brochure and online at **TimeToBreastScreen.nz**. You can also talk with your doctor, nurse or hauora provider or freephone **0800 270 200**.

If you need support to arrange or attend appointments, help is available from Māori and Pacific providers in some areas. Find out about **Screening Support Services** at [info.health.nz/keeping-healthy/cancer-screening/screening-support-services-in-aotearoa-new-zealand](http://info.health.nz/keeping-healthy/cancer-screening/screening-support-services-in-aotearoa-new-zealand)



## Benefits of breast screening

### Screening saves lives

Mammograms help find cancer as early as possible by showing changes inside the breast before anything can be felt. You are more likely to survive breast cancer when cancers are found early and are small.

In New Zealand, people found to have breast cancer following screening are less likely to die from it than those who find breast cancer and are not in the screening programme. Screening has reduced deaths from breast cancer by one third<sup>1</sup>.

The majority of people who develop breast cancer have no family history of it. This is why it's important to be aware of any changes to your breasts and to have regular mammograms regardless of your family history. If you do have a family history, you may have a slightly higher risk.

### Less treatment

Finding breast cancers early can mean less treatment than if cancer is found later and is more advanced.

### A proven method of finding cancer

In women aged 45 to 69, mammograms can find eight or nine out of ten cancers.

**It is still important to look for any changes to your breasts between mammograms and talk with your doctor about these immediately.**

## Risks and harms of breast screening

### Some cancers may not harm you

Mammograms can find small breast cancers that would not be found if you were not screened. Some of these cancers might never grow big enough to become life-threatening. This is the case for 10% of cancers found by breast screening and is called overdiagnosis.

Because it is not possible to tell which cancers will become harmful, treatment will be offered for every cancer found. Treatment options can be discussed with your specialist.

<sup>1</sup> [tewhatuora.govt.nz/publications/cohort-and-case-control-analyses-of-breast-cancer-mortality-breastscreen-aotearoa-1999-2011/](http://tewhatuora.govt.nz/publications/cohort-and-case-control-analyses-of-breast-cancer-mortality-breastscreen-aotearoa-1999-2011/)

## Mammograms do not find all cancers

A mammogram may look normal even if cancer is somewhere in a breast. In women 45 to 69 years old, about one or two out of ten cancers are not found by mammograms. Finding breast cancers has improved since digital mammograms were introduced. These show more detail than the old photograph (film) mammograms. Because mammograms can miss some cancers, it is important to be aware of any changes to your breasts between mammograms.

**If you notice any changes to your breasts that are not normal for you, see your doctor as soon as possible. Do not wait for your mammogram. These changes may not be cancer, but you need to have them checked by your doctor.**

## Radiation

Like all x-rays, mammograms expose you to a small amount of radiation, but this is unlikely to cause harm. The dose of radiation is smaller with the new digital mammography.

## Pain and worry

Breast screening can be uncomfortable or painful for some women as well as worrying. You may bring a support person or member of your family with you if you would like someone with you before and after your mammogram.

Talk with your doctor, nurse or hauora provider about breast screening, and find more information at **TimeToBreastScreen.nz**

**FREEPHONE**

**0800 270 200**



BreastScreen  
Aotearoa

**Health New Zealand**  
Te Whatu Ora

**Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa**  
New Zealand Government