

Breast and Ovarian Cancer

Screening and early detection

This handout explains why your provider advises you to have screening for breast and ovarian cancer.



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What are screening tests?

Screening tests help find diseases like cancer. These exams are done even if someone does not have symptoms of the disease.

Why do women need cancer screening?

Screening helps us find breast or ovarian cancer in its early stages. This is called *early detection*. When cancer is found early, treatment is often easier and more successful. To help us find any cancer early:

- Do regular breast self-exams
- Know the symptoms of breast and ovarian cancer
- Follow the exam schedule your provider advises

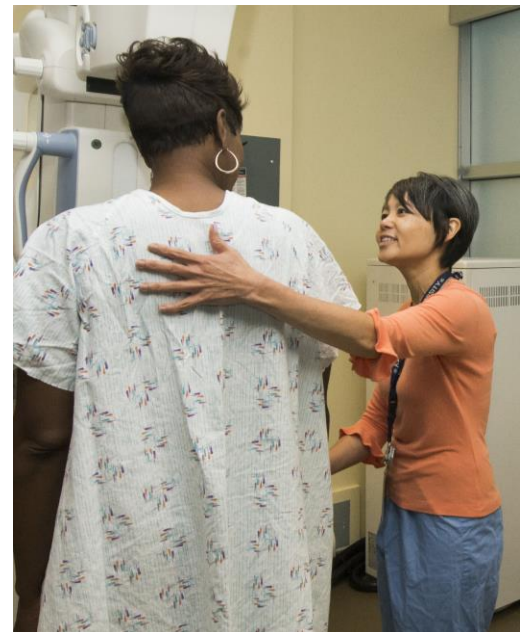
How does screening for breast cancer work?

Breast Self-exams

A breast self-exam (BSE) is the best way to find early changes in your breasts. Do a BSE once a month. Check your breasts for lumps, thickenings, skin dimpling, and other changes. Most breast lumps are *benign* (not cancer), but talk with your provider about any changes you find.

Breast Exams in Clinic

We advise most women to see their provider for a breast exam every year.



The American Cancer Society advises women to have yearly mammograms starting at age 40.

Screening Mammograms

The American Cancer Society advises women age 40 and older to have a *screening mammogram* every year. A mammogram uses a special X-ray machine to check for breast cancer.

After your screening mammogram, your provider may ask you to have an ultrasound scan or *magnetic resonance imaging* (MRI) exam, if more information is needed.

How do I know if I have a higher risk for breast cancer?

Talk with your provider about your risk of breast cancer. You may have a higher risk:

- If several of your female blood relatives had:
 - Breast cancer before age 50
 - Ovarian cancer at any age
- If you have a male relative with breast cancer
- If you have had certain breast disorders or genetic diseases
- If you had radiation therapy to your chest for another type of cancer between age 10 and age 30
- If you carry the *BRCA1* or *BRCA2* gene mutation

What if I have a higher risk for breast cancer?

If your risk for breast cancer is higher than average, your provider may advise you:

- To start yearly mammograms at a younger age
- To see your provider for a breast exam every 6 months
- To have a yearly *magnetic resonance imaging* (MRI) breast exam in addition to your yearly mammograms

If you carry the gene mutation, your provider may advise you to have breast exams in clinic and a yearly mammogram starting at age 25 to 32.

How does screening for ovarian cancer work?

Ovarian cancer is not as common as breast cancer. We only advise regular screening for ovarian cancer for women who have a very high risk of the disease. Women with family members who have had ovarian cancer may be at higher risk. But, only about 10% of women (10 out of 100 women) with ovarian cancer have a family member with the disease.

We advise that all women watch for symptoms that **might** indicate ovarian cancer. The symptoms below have all been reported by women who have ovarian cancer. But, these symptoms can also occur with other, more benign conditions.

Possible Symptoms of Ovarian Cancer

If any of these symptoms last longer than a week, talk with your provider:

- Swelling, discomfort, or pain in your abdomen
- Indigestion
- Loss of appetite, feeling full after a few bites of food
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Feeling much more tired than usual (*fatigue*)
- Unusual shortness of breath, either with activity or at rest
- Back pain
- Problems or pain when you urinate (pee)
- Needing to urinate very often
- Weight gain or loss that you cannot explain
- Changes in your menstrual pattern or flow, cramps, or unusual vaginal discharge
- A mass (lump) in your abdomen

Know what is normal for your body. If you notice something that is unusual and lasts for a week or longer, talk with your provider. It could save your life.

Screening Tests

There has been a lot of research to develop a screening test for ovarian cancer. But at this time, we do not have a good screening test. Other than a full pelvic exam, the 2 tests used most often to screen for ovarian cancer are *transvaginal ultrasound (TVUS)* and the *CA-125 blood test*.

Pelvic Exams

During a pelvic exam, your provider will feel your ovaries and uterus for size, shape, and consistency. This exam can find some cancers at an early stage. But, it is very hard to feel most ovarian tumors until they are in later stages.

We usually advise women to have pelvic exams:

- Every 1 to 3 years for women under 40
- Yearly after age 40

How do I know if I have a higher risk for ovarian cancer?

Talk with your provider about your risk of ovarian cancer. You may have a higher risk if many of your family members have had breast, ovarian, or colorectal cancer, especially at a young age.

If you are at high risk, your provider may advise you to have exams more often. Your provider may suggest pelvic exams, blood tests for tumor markers such as CA125, and *transvaginal ultrasonography* (TVS). It is not yet known if these screening practices will catch ovarian cancer early, but they may be helpful.

For women who know they carry the BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation, we advise:

- Screening with a gynecological exam and CA125 every 6 months
- A yearly transvaginal ultrasound, starting at ages 25 to 35

Questions?

Your questions are important. Ask your provider which numbers below to use if you have questions or concerns.

- Women's Health Care Center, UWMC Roosevelt Clinic: 206.598.5500
- Rivkin Center for Ovarian Cancer: 206.215.6200