

Wellness Articles

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If you would like to be added to the distribution list for these articles, please email: Rebecca.johnson2@albertahealthservices.ca. You will receive a monthly email containing articles for the upcoming four weeks.

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Why breast cancer screening matters – and how to get screened

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. We encourage women, transgender, non-binary and gender diverse individuals who are at risk of breast cancer to get screened. Breast cancer screening can find abnormal changes in your breasts before you have symptoms like a lump. Getting screened regularly can save your life.

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among women. In fact, one out of every seven women will be diagnosed with breast cancer sometime in their life. Every day, one Albertan will die from the disease.

Finding breast cancer early means treatments may work better, which improves the chances of survival. A screening mammogram takes an x-ray image of your breast to find early signs of cancer that you and your healthcare provider may not be able to feel or see yet.

When should I start having a screening mammogram for breast cancer?

In 2022, Alberta lowered the recommended starting age for breast cancer screening to 45. If you are between the ages of 45 and 74, plan to have a screening mammogram once every two years, or as decided by you and your healthcare provider. If you are in this age range, you don't need a healthcare provider's referral. You can book an appointment for a screening mammogram directly with a radiology clinic.

For people who are aged 40 to 44 or 75 and older, it is recommended that you speak with your healthcare provider to talk about if screening is right for you. You will need a referral from your healthcare provider if you decide to screen. Once you have a requisition, you can book an appointment for a screening mammogram at a radiology clinic.

Screening mammograms are available at many clinics in Alberta. Visit screeningforlife.ca or call Health Link at 811 or Screening Programs at 1-866-727-3926.

For those living in rural communities, Screen Test is a service that brings free screening mammography to these communities using two mobile clinics. To find out when the next mobile clinic is in your area, go to screeningforlife.ca or call 1-800-667-0604 (toll free).

What increases my risk for breast cancer?

There are many different factors that impact your risk of breast cancer, some of which you can change and some of which you can't.

Risk factors that can't be changed:

- **Family history:** Having a family member who has had breast cancer increases your risk. Talk to your health care provider about your family history of cancer and know your risk.
- **Age:** As you grow older, your risk of breast cancer increases.
- **Breast density:** Dense breasts (breasts that have a lot of dense tissue instead of fatty tissue) increases your risk of breast cancer. When you get a mammogram, your result letter will tell you how dense your breasts are.

Risk factors that you can change:

- **Physical activity:** Get regular exercise every day (ideally 30 minutes or more) — even if it's a brisk walk or some yard work.
- **Nutrition:** Try to get lots of fruits and vegetables into your diet. See Canada's Food Guide for more information on healthy eating.
- **Alcohol:** Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health recommends not consuming any alcohol.
- **Smoking:** Don't smoke and avoid second-hand smoke. If you're currently a smoker, talk to your healthcare provider about options for quitting or cutting back.

What can you do?

Finding breast cancer early can make all the difference. Regularly getting a screening mammogram can save your life. Know what your breasts normally look and feel like, so that you will notice any changes that may occur between your regular mammogram screenings. Talk to your healthcare provider about your personal risk of breast cancer and what you can do to minimize it.

To find out more about breast cancer screening in Alberta, visit ScreeningForLife.ca.