

Breast implants and mammograms

Breast screening mammograms (breast x-rays) are generally safe for women with breast implants. However, there may be risks. The mammogram might also be less effective in detecting cancer for women with implants because the implant affects how much breast tissue can be seen.

It is important to tell the breast screening clinic if you have implants, as different techniques may be used for the screening mammogram.

Breast implants

Breast implants (also called breast prostheses) are inserted to enlarge or change the shape of the breasts or to reconstruct the breast following surgery. A breast implant has a shell or envelope made of silicone. The shell is filled with either silicone gel or a saline (salt) fluid or a combination of both.

Breast screening

Women aged 50 to 69 are invited to have a free breast screening mammogram every two years through the BreastScreen Australia program. Having regular screening mammograms (breast x-rays) is the best way to detect breast cancer in its earliest stages.

Breast screening can find most breast cancers present at the time of the mammogram but, like many medical tests, it is not 100 per cent effective. The presence, type and position of the implant within the breast affects how much breast tissue can be seen on the mammogram.

If you have implants because of treatment for breast cancer, a general breast screening service such as BreastScreen is not the best service for your needs. You should discuss your individual circumstances with your doctor.

Implants and cancer – no evidence

Currently, there is no evidence that breast cancer occurs more often in women who have breast implants than in women without breast implants.

Different screening mammogram procedures

It's important for BreastScreen to know if you have implants. The radiographer who takes your mammogram may use special techniques to achieve clear images of your breasts. You might find this uncomfortable.

Some women may feel concerned about being exposed to radiation. Breast mammography uses a very low dose of radiation. For most women, the benefits of having regular screening outweigh any possible risk from radiation exposure. Breast screening for women with breast implants often requires more x-ray films than for women without implants and so may involve additional exposure to radiation.

A small risk of damage to the implant

Radiographers take special care to use minimal compression on the breast implant during the breast screening procedure. It is highly unlikely that this compression could cause or worsen leaking of silicone or change the shape or texture of the breast, but it is possible.

Detecting implant problems

If you have problems with your implant, consult your doctor before coming to BreastScreen Victoria. The BreastScreen service does not investigate or diagnose conditions associated with breast implants.

Possible breast implant abnormalities are not always obvious on a screening mammogram but, if a possible implant abnormality is incidentally noted, BreastScreen will tell you in your results letter.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Women's health centre
- BreastScreen Victoria Tel. 13 20 50

Things to remember

- Most women who have breast implants will be able to have regular screening mammograms.
- It is important to tell the BreastScreen clinic if you have implants, as different techniques may be used for the screening mammogram.
- It is unlikely, but possible, that having a screening mammogram could cause or worsen leaking of silicone or change the shape or texture of the breast.
- For most women, the benefits of breast screening mammograms will outweigh the risks.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

BreastScreen Victoria

Copyright © 1999/2009 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.