

## At what age will screening stop?

For most women at increased risk of breast cancer the risk gets less as they get older and their risk then equates to the average risk for women with no risk factors. It is our normal practice to continue screening women at increased risk with mammography every year until age 50. However some women at higher risk will be screened until 59. Thereafter screening will be by mammography every 3 years as part of the UK National Breast Screening Programme. You can consider continuing mammograms from the age of 50-59 if you are in the moderate risk group. Please discuss this with your clinical team.

## How do I get more information?

When you attend the clinic the benefits and limitations of screening will be explained to you. If you need further information at another time you can contact Nicky Turner (phone number below).

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# Screening Women at Increased Risk of Breast Cancer

Breast Services

[www.ulh.nhs.uk](http://www.ulh.nhs.uk)

## Why screen?

All women in the UK are invited to attend for screening by mammography every 3 years from the age of 50. This has enabled detection of earlier and smaller breast cancers than is expected without screening. As a result it is possible to cure more women with breast cancers detected by screening than it is to cure women who present symptomatically with, for example, a breast lump. Screening does not, however, prevent breast cancer and in addition, some women will still die of breast cancer despite having regular mammography.

## Why does screening not start until age 50?

Breast cancer is more common as women get older and mammography is more sensitive at detecting cancer in older women. Screening success largely depends on how common the disease is and the ease with which it can be detected. Young women are more likely than older women to have cancers that cannot be seen on a mammogram. As there are disadvantages to screening as well as advantages, it is currently thought that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages in women under age 50.

## What are the disadvantages of screening?

Mammography may detect a change in the breast that turns out to be non-cancerous. Tests, sometimes including surgery, may need to be performed before reassurance that all is well can be given. Each mammogram also gives you a small dose of radiation. Whilst we do not believe that this is a concern, it is theoretically possible that regular mammography in young women may actually cause a breast cancer to occur.

The level of radiation exposure from a mammogram is equivalent to that experienced when flying to Australia and back. Another activity with roughly the same risk is driving a car for about 3,000 miles or living in an urban area for 3 months. Attending for mammography may also cause considerable anxiety.

## Why I am being screened by mammography before I am 50?

It is considered that, for young women at increased risk of breast cancer, the advantages of screening by mammography outweigh the disadvantages. Whilst there are still limitations with mammography, this remains the best way we have of detecting breast cancer “early” while it is small.

## Are there alternatives to mammography?

One alternative to mammography is to be examined regularly by an expert in breast examination. There is little evidence to suggest that this is an effective method of screening. Other ways of imaging the breast are under investigation but none have so far been shown to be better than mammography.

## How often will I have a mammogram?

We currently recommend mammography every year for young women at increased risk of breast cancer. This is obviously more frequent than the 3 yearly mammography offered to women over age 50 as part of the UK National Screening Programme. This is because breast cancer in young women may appear more quickly than in older women. If you are aware of a breast problem before you are due to have your mammogram, please make an appointment with your GP for referral to our diagnostic service. If you are having regular clinic appointments, you can phone the helpline to arrange an earlier appointment.

## At what age does screening start?

Screening women who are at **increased** risk of breast cancer usually starts at age 40. In women at **very high** risk it may start before this.