

Breast screening for women with a higher risk of breast cancer

What does 'higher risk' mean?

You have been assessed by a specialist in genetics or oncology as being at more risk of developing breast cancer than women in the general population. Women at higher risk of breast cancer are offered breast screening at an earlier age than women from the general population. We call this surveillance screening.

How often will I be offered surveillance breast screening?

You will be offered screening more often than 'routine' screening, at least up until the age of 50. For some women, more frequent screening will continue. For others, they will then have routine breast screening, which is every three years.

You may be offered mammography (breast x-rays), MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), or possibly both. It will depend on your age, and the reason for your higher risk of breast cancer. The genetics or oncology specialist will already have let you know what type of screening you can expect to have.

For the general population, women get their first routine screening invitation between their 50th and 53rd birthdays. This age is gradually being lowered, so that women will have had their first screening invitation by their 50th birthday. It will take a while for this to happen everywhere in England.

How will my screening be done?

There are two types of screening technology used for women at higher risk:

Mammography – x-rays of the breasts. You can find out more about mammography in the booklet that comes with your screening invitation, called 'NHS breast screening'. This booklet is sent to all women invited to NHS Breast Screening, and includes information about the benefits and disadvantages of screening. You can find the booklet on our website here <http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breastscreen/publications/ia-02.html>

MRI – magnetic resonance imaging. The MRI scanner is a large tube surrounded by a strong magnetic field, with a platform bed that slides into it. For breast screening, you will be asked to lie face down on the bed. There are cushioned holes for your breasts, and a special rest for your head. MRI involves taking many different images of the breast, which may take a while. During the process, you will be given a small injection in your arm. This contains a liquid which helps different areas of breast tissue to show up on the scans. The whole imaging session usually lasts between 30 minutes and an hour.

Before MRI is carried out, you will be asked some standard questions to ensure your safety. MRI is not suitable for everyone. The questions you are asked will allow screening staff to decide if it is right for you. MRI for breast screening is carried out at specialist centres, as both the equipment and screening staff must meet special specific screening standards.

Is screening suitable for everyone?

There may be certain circumstances that mean screening cannot be carried out. If you have any concerns about whether you can be screened, please contact your local breast screening unit.

What happens when I reach the standard screening age?

Most women will change to being screened every three years. Breast cancers are generally easier to spot in women aged 50 onwards, and they also tend to grow more slowly. This means that you do not need to be screened so often. However, some women will continue to have screening more often than every three years.

If you were previously screened using MRI, you may change to being screened using mammography. This is because mammography is better at detecting breast cancers in older breast tissue. Some women will have MRI as well as mammography. This will be decided by the clinician.

What happens when routine breast screening invitations stop?

Currently, women receive screening invitations up to the age of 70. This is gradually being extended to 73. Once you no longer receive invitations, you can still be screened every three years by booking your own appointments. Simply contact your local screening unit.

What if I notice any changes in my breasts?

No screening method can detect every cancer; and cancer can develop in between screening appointments. If you notice any unusual changes in your breasts, please speak to your GP as soon as possible. Do not wait for your next screening appointment.

Be Breast Aware

- You should know what is normal for you
- Know what changes to look for
- Look at and feel your breasts (in any way that is best for you)
- Tell your GP about any changes as soon as possible
- Go for breast screening when invited (if you decide you want to be screened)

You can read or download our leaflet 'Be Breast Aware' at:

<http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breastscreen/publications/be-breast-aware.html>

More information:

For more information about NHS Breast Screening, visit our website at:
www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breast

You can find out more about breast cancer risks, including family history and genetic risk, on the Cancer Research UK website at:
<http://www.cancerhelp.org.uk/type/breast-cancer/about/risks/definite-breast-cancer-risks>

This leaflet is available to download in large print at:

www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breastscreen/higher-risk.html