**Time for your first mammogram? Then read on.**

First: some stats.

Apart from skin cancer, breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in the world for women of all races[[1]](#footnote-1). Last year alone there were over 2 million women diagnosed with breast cancer and just under 700 000 deaths[[2]](#footnote-2) – with the chances of getting breast cancer increasing as you get older.

One of the best ways to spot this type of cancer – and save lives – is through a regular breast screening known as a mammogram. These are x-ray images of the breast that allow an early diagnosis for breast cancer, sometimes as much as 3 years before any physical signs of cancer appear. Thanks to early detection, the risk of dying from breast cancer can be reduced by as much as 30%[[3]](#footnote-3).

Tonja Dodd (MPH), Senior Health Strategy Analyst at Vitality USA, answers some frequently asked questions about mammograms, so you know what to expect for your first screening.

***When should I start having mammograms?***

The World Health Organization recommends that women should begin having mammograms every 1 to 2 years after their 40th birthday. If you’re at high-risk (for example, you have a family history of breast cancer), your doctor may recommend that you have this screening at more frequent intervals and may also recommend additional screening.

***What can I expect?***

A mammogram is a fast screening (taking less than 30 minutes to complete). The screening is usually done by 1 or 2 mammographers who will answer all your questions. You’ll be asked to undress from the waist up and you’ll go into an x-ray room and place each breast on an x-ray machine between 2 ‘plates’. Your breast is then squeezed together by these plates while the x-rays are done (usually 4 x-rays in total are taken – 2 for each breast).

***Does it hurt?***

The discomfort is usually minimal for most women, but you might experience some brief pain which may linger for a day or two. The procedure is safe: there is only a very small amount of radiation exposure from a mammogram, and results are available soon after the x-ray is complete, which means less anxiety waiting for the outcome.

***How can I prepare on the day?***

Contact your healthcare professional to book the mammogram appointment – this is normally done at a specialist medical centre. Schedule your appointment for one week after your period so that your breasts aren’t as tender and avoid perfume or body lotion on the day that can interfere with the screening results. Wear a shirt that you can easily take off and let the mammographer know if you have implants.

***Who pays for my mammogram?***

If you are a member of a medical scheme administered by <x>, you are covered for one mammogram every two years, paid from your Screening Benefit. Members who are high-risk are eligible for a yearly mammogram.

***Do I earn Vitality points for having a mammogram?***

Yes, you can earn up to <x> Vitality points for having a mammogram if you are 40 years or older. These points are automatically allocated or you can upload your screening results into the Vitality app manually to claim your points.

Vitality data shows that people who get regular health checks are more likely to receive an early diagnosis for a health condition and this means better long-term outcomes – easier treatment options, less severe illness and a greatly reduced risk of dying. Make mammograms a screening priority and encourage the age-relevant women in your life to do this too.

*For more information about Vitality’s evidence-based approach that encourages and rewards members for healthier living, visit the*[*Vitality Global*](https://www.vitalityglobal.com/)*website.*

1. National Library of Medicines. Breast cancer epidemiology, risk factors, classification, prognostic markers, and current treatment strategies. [Link](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8428369/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. National Library of Medicines. Breast Cancer Mortality. [Link](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8389642/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. What is a mammogram? [Link](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast/basic_info/mammograms.htm) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)