

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.

An archive of past wellness articles is available at <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/9966.asp>

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Breast density and screening mammograms

Did you know that breasts are made up of fat and other tissue? Breast density is the amount of fibrous or glandular tissue compared to the amount of fatty tissue in the breast.

A screening mammogram is an x-ray of the breast that's used to find early signs of cancer before symptoms appear. Mammograms are also used to measure density within four categories or scores: a) fatty; b) scattered areas of fibroglandular density; c) heterogeneously dense; and, d) extremely dense.

Having dense breast tissue (category c or d) is quite common. For example, about 46 per cent of women aged 50 to 54 have it. Several factors affect breast density, such as genetics, hormone levels and overall body fat. Density tends to decrease with age.

Why does breast density matter?

Dense tissue and cancer tumours both appear white on mammograms, making it harder to identify cancer.

Although having dense breasts can increase an individual's breast cancer risk by a small amount, it's important to know that other factors, such as age and family history, have a greater impact.

Whether you have dense breasts or not, screening mammograms are still the best way to find breast cancer early. If you're between the ages of 50 and 74, it's important to be screened regularly every two years, or as decided by you and your healthcare provider.

Finding out your breast density score

Breast density scores are now included in screening mammogram result letters in Alberta. By including these scores, Alberta Health Services is encouraging women to



have open and informed conversations with their healthcare providers about their health and personal risk of breast cancer.

Visit screeningforlife.ca to learn more about breast density.