

Disabilities and breast cancer screening

A disability is a health condition that makes it hard to do regular daily activities, such as walking, talking, working or self-care. Women with disabilities tend to get screened for breast cancer much less often than women without disabilities. Every woman needs to have regular clinical breast exams and mammograms, even if she has a disability.

Women with disabilities are as likely to have breast cancer as other women. In some cases, having a disability increases a woman's risk of breast cancer. Some risk factors for breast cancer, like exposure to large amounts of radiation, never being pregnant or not getting regular exercise are more common among women with disabilities than among women without disabilities. Because of this, it is important that women with disabilities, like all women, get screened for breast cancer.



Barriers to screening

Research has shown there are several reasons why women with disabilities may not receive breast cancer screening:

1. It is hard to access the place where the screening is offered:
 - Women may have a hard time making and keeping medical appointments. For example, a woman who is deaf may not be able to easily contact a clinic that does not have a TDD text telephone. Her doctor's office may not have a sign language interpreter that can be present at the appointment.
 - Facilities for breast cancer screening are not always accessible to some women, such as those who use a wheelchair. For example, there may be no ramp or dressing room that is large enough to accommodate her wheelchair.
 - The equipment used is not always accessible to some women, such as those who have trouble walking or standing still in one position. For example, mobile mammography vans are not always wheelchair accessible. Mammography equipment may not adjust enough to allow some women to easily position themselves or sit while being screened.
2. Some disabled women believe that they are less likely to have breast cancer than other women, since they are already coping with one disability. They may believe that "lightning doesn't strike twice."
3. Health care workers often don't know much about disabilities. They may focus on the disability and not screening for breast cancer. They may not know how to make sure that disabled patients get the breast cancer screening they need.

Successful screening for women with disabilities?

- Find a doctor who is sensitive to your disability needs. Ask friends or disability organizations who they suggest.
- When scheduling a mammogram, tell the clinic about your disability. Let them know how they can help you get screened. It's important to talk about this up front, since some clinics may not be accessible to you. For example, if you find it hard to stand during a mammogram, ask if you can sit instead. If you need a sign language interpreter, tell them where to call to arrange one.
- Ask your doctor to perform a clinical breast exam.
- If you are able, get to know the way your breasts look and feel. This will help you to know when something has changed.
- If you are not pleased with the services you receive, let them know. Too often, clinics don't know how they need to improve their services to meet their patients' needs.
- Bring a friend or someone you trust with you. They can assist you and support you, when needed.

Treatment and recovery

If you are being treated for breast cancer or are a survivor, your disability may be affected by the treatment. Each woman is unique. Women who have trouble traveling may find it hard to go to a hospital that's far from their home for treatment. Women with a disability that affects their upper body may find it harder to manage lymphedema if they can't massage their arm.

There are many ways in which a disability can affect your treatment and recovery. Think about issues such as:

- Are your muscles weak?
- Can you walk?
- Do you use crutches?
- Do you have trouble with fatigue?

Look at yourself as a whole person. Share your concerns with your doctor. Together you can find a way to treat your breast cancer that takes your disability into account.

Resources

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

The National Women's Health Information Center.
(Voice) 1-800-994-9662, (TDD) 1-888-220-5446
www.womenshealth.gov/www/

Breast Health Access for Women with Disabilities.
(Voice) 1-510-204-4866, (TDD) 1-510-204-4574
www.bhawd.org

North Carolina Office on Disability and Health.
(Voice) 1-919-966-0871, (TTY) 1-919-843-3811
www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncodh

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Detection
- Breast Imaging Methods
- Getting the Support You Need
- Lymphedema
- Talking With Your Doctor