

WHAT ARE DENSE BREASTS?

HOW DO THEY AFFECT BREAST CANCER RISK?

Amber Nason • Oct 12, 2016

One of the risk factors for breast cancer is dense breast tissue. In fact, the Canadian Cancer Society states that the cancer risk for women with dense breast tissue in 75 percent or more of their breasts increases by four to six times, compared to women with little or no dense breast tissue.

At the Toronto Centre for Medical Imaging, all of our mammography reports to our referring doctors include the BIRADS, breast density.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE DENSE BREASTS?

You can't tell by looking at them, whether or not you have dense breasts. It is a clinical diagnosis that can only be assessed by mammography. Dense breasts have less fat and more glandular and connective tissue. Unfortunately, they also make a mammogram harder to read, so smaller cancers may be hidden. **Plus, the denser the breast tissue, the higher the risk of breast cancer.**

On a mammogram, fatty tissue looks dark, while both dense tissue and tumours look white, making it hard to distinguish between the two. The white-looking breast cancers are easier to see on a mammogram when they're surrounded by dark-looking fatty tissue.

Dense breasts are normal. Your breast tissue changes as you age, usually becoming less dense as you get older and go through menopause, but some women continue to have dense breast regardless of age. Dense breasts may also run in families and be affected by taking hormone replacement therapy.

HOW DO YOU DETERMINE YOUR BREAST DENSITY?

To determine your breast density, you will need to schedule a mammogram (for women 40 and older).

The Breast Imaging Reporting and Database Systems, or BI-RADS, classifies breast density into four groups:

- **Mostly Fatty (Type A):** Mostly fat and with little dense tissue.
- **Scattered Density (Type B):** Quite a bit of fat with a few areas of dense tissue.
- **Heterogeneously Dense (Type C):** Many areas of dense tissue evenly distributed through the breasts.
- **Extremely Dense (Type D):** A lot of dense tissue. This may make it hard to see a cancer on a mammogram because the cancer can blend in with the normal tissue.

While scoring is not an exact science and radiologists often disagree about levels of density, it is important to get screened. The Toronto Centre for Medical Imaging uses the BI-RADS program which scores density from A to D.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU HAVE DENSE BREASTS?

Continue having regular screening mammograms. Most experts agree that annual screening should begin at age 40. For women with dense breasts, current evidence indicates that supplementary screening with Automated Breast Ultrasound (ABUS) helps detect cancers that are missed on mammography. If you would like supplementary screening with ABUS, discuss this option with your doctor and call our office at 416 368 8488 to book your appointment.

ABUS is **not** an OHIP insured service. The fee for the test is \$199.00

