

# Women: Do You Know Your Breast Density?

With breast cancer top of mind thanks to thought-provoking awareness campaigns and the passionate efforts of advocates around the country, you would think breast density as a topic would be in the spotlight.

Yet it's not. In fact, breast density is the healthcare topic no one seems to be talking about despite its importance in predicting lifetime risk of breast cancer.

Ladies: do you know your breast density? Or even if you should know? Do you know why?

If you can't answer those questions, you're in decent company. We haven't done a good enough job in the medical community speaking out about breast density and how it relates to breast cancer.

That needs to change, and we're ready to start.

At Cassling, we empower you to make smart choices about your breast health, so we're answering some of the common questions people are asking (plus some most never even thought to ask!) about dense breasts.

## What Are Dense Breasts?

Your breasts have three types of tissue:

**Fatty tissue** is made of soft, pliable fat cells;  
Firmer **fibrous tissue** forms the breasts' support structure;  
**Glandular tissue** controls lactation.

All breasts have different proportions of the three, but "breasts are considered dense if you have a lot of fibrous or glandular tissue but not much fat," says JoAnn Meiers, a Diagnostic Medical Sonographer and Clinical Sales specialist for Siemens Healthineers.

Density is rated on a spectrum, from "Mostly Fatty" all the way to "Extremely Dense." Most women fall somewhere in between, having either "scattered" breasts with only a little dense tissue, or else "moderately dense" (or "heterogeneous") breasts.

Half of all women have dense breasts – 40% with heterogeneous and 10% with extremely dense. So if you have dense breasts, you're not alone.

## Why Do They Develop?

The short answer: we're not sure.

"It's not always clear why some women have a lot of dense breast tissue and others don't," JoAnn says. But we do know a few factors that contribute.



**Genetics:** If dense breasts run in your family, you're more likely to have them as well.



**Birth Weight:** The higher the birth weight, the increased possibility of dense breasts.



**Pregnancy:** Each pregnancy a woman has will decrease her breast density – the more children she has, the fattier her breasts become.



**Age:** Hormonal changes brought on by menopause decrease breast density.

So, older women who had children will likely have fattier breasts than younger women who have never been pregnant.

## How Do I Find Out If I Have Them?

You can't rely on the factors above to tell you the condition of your breasts and, unfortunately, you can't check yourself at home, either.

That may seem counterintuitive. After all, doctors have told you to conduct breast self-exams, where you feel for lumps, thickening and hard knots. That sounds similar to dense tissue, doesn't it?

But dense breast tissue isn't something you can feel. It's a visual judgment **that can only be made with a mammogram.**

Renee Pinsky, MD, a breast-imaging specialist at the University of Michigan, says that "a woman's breast may feel soft but appear dense on the mammogram. And a fatty or less-dense breast may have areas that feel firmer."

So there's another reason to get that yearly mammogram – it's the only way to tell if you have dense breasts.

Just because you get one, however, doesn't mean your provider will tell you how dense your breasts are. It all depends on where you live.

32 states require providers to inform you if a mammogram spots breast density. The rest don't. Check [this map](#) to see what the law means for you.

If you live in one of the states that doesn't require providers to notify you, **don't be afraid to start the conversation yourself.** Be your own best advocate. Ask questions about breast density. You deserve to be informed.

## What Could Dense Breasts Mean For My Health?

Dense breasts come with risks. Breast cancer is four to six times more likely to develop in women with extremely dense breasts – although researchers have not yet discovered why.

Adding to the problem, dense breasts can also hide cancer from your providers. Cancerous lesions and dense tissue both appear as solid white areas under a mammogram. Even trained specialists struggle to spot the difference.

In fact, "mammograms will miss more than half of all cancers present in women with dense breasts," says JoAnn. Sometimes,

women with these hidden cancers falsely believe they're not at risk. Cancer takes hold without them knowing it. They miss the chance to proactively manage their condition and, tragically, that can be fatal.

This isn't meant to alarm you. The five-year risk of breast cancer for a healthy 45 year-old woman with no breast cancer in her family – even with extremely dense breast tissue – *is only 1.3%.*


But it's important for you to know that, if you have dense breasts, mammograms cannot rule out breast cancer.

## What Should I Do If I Have Them?

If your mammogram reveals dense breasts, don't jump to any conclusions. Every case is different, and you'll need help to figure out the next steps.

Talk to your provider. They'll be able to tell you what your breast density means for your health. They may recommend additional scans, like a **breast ultrasound using an Automated Breast Volume Scanner**, which can root out hidden signs of cancer – even in extremely dense breasts. Or, they could tell you that they don't see a reason for concern. It all depends on your individual case.

That's why you shouldn't let questions linger. Bring them to your provider. Arm yourself with the knowledge to manage breast density – so you can take charge of your health.

 [Click here to learn more about the many new and exciting testing options available in women's health!](#)

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## About Cassling

Cassling is an Advanced Partner with Siemens Healthineers, providing comprehensive diagnostic imaging equipment sales and service to healthcare organizations. Founded in 1984, Cassling has built a strong reputation for excellence based on our commitment to customer service and dedication to improving community healthcare.

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