

# Breast screening

For women with a higher  
risk of breast cancer



Breast Screening

## What does 'higher risk' mean?

You have been assessed by a specialist in genetics or oncology as being at greater risk of developing breast cancer than women in the general population. This is because you have one of the following genetic mutations: BRCA1, BRCA2, TP53, ataxia-telangiectasia (A-T) homozygotes, ataxia-telangiectasia (A-T) heterozygotes; or because you had radiotherapy that included your breasts in the treatment area (supradiaphragmatic radiotherapy) before the age of 30.

Women at higher risk of breast cancer are now being offered breast screening at an earlier age than women from the general population. We call this surveillance screening.

## How often will I be offered surveillance breast screening?

Most women will be offered surveillance screening annually. A small number of women will require less frequent screening than this.

You will be offered mammography, MRI, or both, depending on your age and the reason for your higher risk of breast cancer. Your specialist may already have let you know what type of screening you can expect to have and how often you need to be screened.

## **Making a decision about surveillance breast screening**

Current guidelines recommend that women at higher risk of breast cancer attend annual surveillance screening. It is up to you whether you wish to participate in surveillance screening. If you do not wish to participate, you will be asked to confirm this in writing.

## **Where will my screening be done?**

Surveillance screening for women at higher risk of breast cancer will be carried out at a specialist imaging unit in Antrim Area Hospital.

## **How will my screening be done?**

There are two types of screening technology used for women at higher risk:

### **Digital mammography (X-rays of the breasts)**

Mammography uses x-rays to examine the breast. X-rays can very rarely cause cancer. Having mammograms every year very slightly increases the chance of getting cancer over a woman's lifetime. Information about the risks and benefits of screening for women invited to the routine Breast Screening Programme is available in the information leaflet *Northern Ireland Breast Screening: Helping You Decide* (available at [www.cancerscreening.hscni.net](http://www.cancerscreening.hscni.net)). You may wish to contact the Breast Screening Unit if you would like to discuss this further.



You will have to undress from the waist up for your mammogram, so it is a good idea to wear a separate top instead of a dress. The radiographer will position you so that each breast, in turn, is placed on the X-ray machine and gently compressed against a plastic plate. This can be uncomfortable, and some women find it painful. Usually, any pain passes quickly. Two mammograms are usually taken of each breast from different angles.

## **MRI – magnetic resonance imaging**

An MRI scan is an imaging procedure, which uses magnetic fields and radio-waves to take pictures of your body. The scanner is a large tunnel, which is open at both ends, is well lit and ventilated.



**For best results, breast MRI examinations should be performed between 6 and 16 days from the beginning of your last menstrual period.**

You will be asked to fill in and sign a safety questionnaire before your scan. It is important that you **tell the radiographer if you have any metal inside your body**. This is to ensure there are no adverse effects during the scan from any previous surgery, illness or injury you may have had. The radiographer will answer any queries you have regarding this.

You will have to change into a gown and all metal objects must be removed from your person before you enter the scan room.

Before the test you will receive an injection of dye into a vein in your arm. This dye will help to show any abnormalities in your breast tissue more clearly.

You will be asked to lie face down on the scanning bed allowing your breasts to rest in the cushioned holes provided. We will make you as comfortable as possible as it is very important you remain still throughout the scan.

A 'call-bell' will be given to you so that you can contact the radiographer at any time. The machine makes a loud banging noise when taking the images. Earplugs or headphones are provided to minimise this. The whole imaging procedure usually lasts between 30 minutes and an hour. You should not feel anything during the procedure and you will be able to leave the department immediately afterwards.

## When will I get my results?

You will receive a letter with your results within 2 weeks of your appointment. The results will also be sent to your GP.

Most women will have a normal result. A small number of women will need more tests because they have an abnormality on their mammogram and/or MRI. These women will be invited to attend Antrim Area Hospital for more tests.

Most of the abnormalities are caused by harmless changes within the breast and do not mean that you have breast cancer.

If you attend a family history clinic your specialist clinician will be informed about your screening results.

If you do need treatment you can choose to be referred to your local specialist breast care team.

## What happens when I reach the normal screening age?

For the general population, women get their first routine screening invitation between their 50<sup>th</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> birthdays and are invited for screening every 3 years up to the age of 70.

Most women at higher risk continue to require annual surveillance screening after the age of 50. If you were previously screened using MRI before the age of 50, you may change to being screened using only mammography.

This is because mammography is better at detecting breast cancers in women over 50. Some women will have MRI as well as mammography. This will be decided by the radiologists in the specialist imaging unit in Antrim Area Hospital.

Most women at higher risk who are currently attending their local breast screening unit for breast screening every 3 years will instead be invited to attend Antrim Area Hospital for annual mammography.

## What if I notice any changes in my breasts?

No screening method can detect every cancer; and cancer can develop in between screening appointments. If you notice any unusual changes in your breasts, please speak to your GP as soon as possible. Do not wait for your next screening appointment, even if it is soon.

## Be breast aware

You should:

- know what is normal for you
- know what changes to look and feel for
- look at and feel your breasts (in any way that is best for you)
- tell your GP about any changes as soon as possible
- attend for breast screening when invited



Our breast cancer awareness leaflet is available at [www.cancerscreening.hscni.net](http://www.cancerscreening.hscni.net)

## More information

For more information about the Northern Ireland Breast Screening Programme for breast cancer higher risk surveillance, visit our website at:  
[www.cancerscreening.hscni.net](http://www.cancerscreening.hscni.net)

For more information about BRCA genetic mutations visit  
BRCA LINK NI at: [www.brcani.co.uk](http://www.brcani.co.uk)

For more information on breast cancer genetics, including a support telephone line, please visit:  
[www.breastcancergenetics.co.uk](http://www.breastcancergenetics.co.uk)



### Public Health Agency

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[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)  
[www.cancerscreening.hscni.net](http://www.cancerscreening.hscni.net)  
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