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**Who are we?**

Dense Breasts Canada (DBC) is a volunteer group of breast cancer survivors and healthcare professionals raising awareness about the risks of dense breasts and advocating for breast density notification. Last October, British Columbia became the first province to notify women of their breast density. Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta and Prince Edward Island are working on implementing notification as well.

**What are dense breasts?**

All breasts contain glands and fat. A breast with more glands and little fat is considered a dense breast. Dense breasts are very common; about 40% of women over age 40 have dense breasts, but most do not know it because they have not been told.

**Why does breast density matter?**

1. Dense breasts are an independent risk factor for breast cancer. The higher the density, the higher the risk of cancer. Cancer is 4-6 times more likely in women with the densest breasts.

2. Breast density is a more significant risk factor than family history.

3. In women with dense breasts, mammograms are less accurate. Dense breast tissue shows up as white on a mammogram and so does cancer, creating a masking effect. The accuracy of mammography declines as density increases and more than 50% of the cancers present in the densest breasts will be missed.

4. By the time cancer is discovered in women with dense breasts, it is often in a later stage and women with dense breasts are more likely to need mastectomy and chemotherapy. Survival is affected by a late or missed diagnosis for women with dense breasts.

**Patient access to breast density information in Ontario**

The reporting protocol used by radiologists in Ontario is outdated. In Ontario radiologists only tick off if the amount of dense tissue is under or over 75%. Dense breasts are those with more than 50% dense tissue. Therefore, women in the 50-75% category are ignored, and no information is shared about their cancer risk. Women with over 75% are notified but women with over 50% are also at risk for the masking effect of dense tissue and kept in the dark.

**What can women do if they know they have dense breasts?**

They can have the chance to protect themselves from harm by:

* being vigilant practicing breast self-examination between screenings
* mitigating lifestyle risk factors (exercise, weight, alcohol use, etc.)
* understanding that a normal mammogram doesn’t mean cancer is not present
* considering supplementary screening, such as ultrasound

**What can the Government of Ontario do?**

The government can easily provide women with their density information by adding a line in the mammogram results letter with the density category and a line about the associated risks. A key part of early detection is ensuring women learn their breast density and associated risks so that they can have a discussion with their doctor about their risk factors. The Government of Ontario can save women’s lives by providing women with lifesaving information.

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