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**About us**

Dense Breasts Canada (DBC) is a nonprofit made up of breast cancer survivors and healthcare professionals. DBC is dedicated to:

1. raising awareness about the risks of dense breasts

2. advocating that women be told their breast density in their mammogram results letter.

**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. There are four categories of breast density (see image). Breasts with over 50% dense tissue are dense breasts.

**Why it is important for women to know if they have dense breasts**

1. For 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 the density increases; up to 50% of the cancers present in the densest breasts may be missed.
2. 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 than in women with the lowest density.

Cancer in women with dense breasts is often discovered by the woman herself when she feels a lump in between her scheduled mammograms. It is often found in a later stage. Women with dense breasts are more likely to need mastectomy and chemotherapy and their prognosis is impacted.

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

There are two categories of dense breasts 50-75% and > 75%.

1. In Ontario, women in the highest category of density (>75%) are notified and asked to return annually for a mammogram (instead of every 2 years).
2. However, the majority of women with dense breasts fall into the 50-75% category and they do not know if they have dense breasts because they have not been informed. Women in this category are put at risk because information about their cancer risk is not given to them.

Radiologists have now been asked to include the breast density category for all women in the report to the family doctor, but this is not uniform practice. Regardless, doctors are unlikely to convey the information in the report to the patient the next time they may see them.

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

The government can easily provide women with their density information by adding a simple line in the mammogram results letter with the density category and associated risks. A key part of early detection is ensuring women learn their breast density 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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