

Breast Cancer Prevention for People with Disabilities



“After living with quadriplegia for decades, never did I imagine I would also have to battle breast cancer. For me, the diagnosis of Stage 3 breast cancer came after identifying a lump that hadn’t been there before; it was out of the ordinary. All kinds of thoughts crossed my mind, like, ‘How will they perform a mammogram when I’m in a wheelchair?’ Plus, I worried about how cancer would affect my husband and caregivers.” — Joni Eareckson Tada, disability advocate, founder of the nonprofit Joni and Friends, and quadriplegic of 50 years.

Breast cancer can happen to just about anyone — including men, adolescents, and women with disabilities. The CDC states, “Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among women in the United States, and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths.”

A screening mammogram (an X-ray of the breast) is the best way to find breast cancer early, so that it can be treated effectively. But according to a 2010 survey conducted by the CDC and NCHS, compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are less likely to receive a mammogram. This may be due to several concerns, including accessibility of the facility, cost of the procedure, or fear of the unexpected. While these concerns are legitimate, we hope to address them in this resource and provide you with the tools to learn how you can best prevent breast cancer, regardless of your disability or health condition.

Preventative Tips

- 1. Eat healthy and drink plenty of water.** Reduce your intake of processed foods, saturated or trans fats, and sugary drinks. Let half of your plate consist of colorful vegetables, such as spinach, carrots, or beats. You don't have to break your wallet to keep a healthy diet. Try to shop for produce that is in season and look for discounts in weekly mailers. Drink lots of water throughout the day. If you tend to reach for sugary drinks, squeeze a bit of lemon in your water, or infuse it with some fruit or mint leaves to give it some flavor.



Eating healthy and drinking plenty of water will help keep your weight down, too. That's especially important, as multiple studies demonstrate women who are overweight are more prone to develop breast cancers.

- 2. Exercise.** When we think of exercise, many of us imagine someone sweating and panting on a treadmill. But depending on your disability, exercise may "look" different to you. For example, if you are a wheelchair user, ensure that you are doing any range of motion exercises that your physician or physical therapist has prescribed for you. You can also contact local gyms or community centers for accessible exercise classes.

Exercising will help you stay limber and keep your weight down. Plus, exercising makes your body release endorphins — natural “feel good” hormones that will help fight off depression. Just remember to talk to your doctor before attempting any new exercise regimen.

- 3. Limit alcohol and don't smoke.** Based on research on the effect of alcohol on breast cancer, the Mayo Clinic recommends limiting yourself to 1 alcoholic beverage per day. Also, because research has shown a link between smoking and breast cancer, particularly in premenopausal women, it's best to quit smoking. If you struggle with alcohol and/or smoking, talk to your doctor about ways to quit.



- 4. If you are able, perform a self-breast exam.** A self-breast exam is a way for you to examine your breast to identify any unusual or new changes in breast and nipple shape, texture, and color. For women who menstruate, it's recommended that the self-breast exam be performed after the end of each monthly period. However, performing a self-breast exam may be difficult if you are blind or if you have limited arm/hand mobility. To learn how you or your caregiver can best examine your breasts on a regular basis, talk to your health care provider.

- 5. Schedule a clinical breast exam.** If you notice any changes in your breasts, schedule a



clinical breast exam right away. But if you're uncertain or are unable to perform a self-breast exam, make this simple appointment to have a medical professional examine your breasts. It will give you peace of mind — and if your doctor notices anything unusual, he or she will likely request a diagnostic mammogram, special ultrasound, and/or screening MRI.

A clinical breast exam can be performed by your OBGYN or primary care provider. Your health insurance may cover this exam as a “Well Woman Exam,” which often consists of a breast exam, pelvic exam and pap smear, and contraceptive counseling.

6. Schedule a screening mammogram. The American Cancer Society recommends the following cancer screening guidelines:

- **Women ages 40-44:** If you wish to do so, schedule a yearly clinical breast cancer screening with a mammogram.
- **Women ages 45-54:** You should have a mammogram every year.
- **Women 55 and older:** You can continue with yearly mammograms, or switch to mammograms every 2 years.

Medicare, Medicaid, and most insurance companies cover the cost of mammograms. The Affordable Care Act requires that all new health insurance plans cover yearly mammograms with no out-of-pocket costs (no co-payments or co-insurance) for women ages 40 and older. Still, to be certain, contact your health insurance provider about the costs associated with a screening or diagnostic mammogram.

If, however, you do not have insurance, or your health insurance does not cover the cost, there are nonprofits and community programs that provide free and/or low-cost mammograms to people in need. Also, because October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, many imaging centers offer mammograms at reduced rates in October.

The CDC’s National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP) offers free or low-cost mammograms and education about breast cancer. Find out if you qualify by [visiting the NBCCEDP website](#).

To find a certified mammography facility in your area, [visit the FDA website](#).

Mammogram Tips for Women with Disabilities

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provide the following list of things to consider when scheduling a mammogram.

Questions you can ask when scheduling your mammogram that can help you prepare for your appointment:

- How should I dress?
- How do I prepare if I use a wheelchair or a scooter?
- Can the machine be adjusted so I can remain seated?
- How long is the appointment and can I have additional time if I need it?

Let the scheduling staff, radiology technicians, or radiologist know whether you can:

- Sit upright with or without assistance.
- Lift and move your arms.
- Transfer from your chair/scooter.
- Undress/dress without assistance.

Image: Wikipedia.org

When preparing for your mammogram, remember:

- Wear a blouse that opens in the front.
- Wear a bra that can be removed easily.
- Do not wear deodorant or body powder.
- If you have questions about the exam, related to your disability, discuss them with your primary care physician, women's health specialist, radiologist, physician's assistant, or other healthcare professional.



References & Helpful Websites

The U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA): Search for Certified Mammography Facilities

<https://www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/MammographyQualityStandardsActandProgram/ConsumerInformation/ucm113962.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- “Women with Disabilities and Breast Cancer Screening”
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/breast-cancer-screening.html>
- “The Right to Know Campaign” featuring stories of women with disabilities who were diagnosed with breast cancer
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/righttoknow/>
- Find out if you qualify for free or low-cost screenings through the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP)
<https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/screenings.htm>

The American Cancer Society: Guidelines for the Early Detection of Cancer

<https://www.cancer.org/healthy/find-cancer-early/cancer-screening-guidelines/american-cancer-society-guidelines-for-the-early-detection-of-cancer.html>

The Mayo Clinic: “Breast Cancer Prevention: How to reduce your risk.”

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/womens-health/in-depth/breast-cancer-prevention/art-20044676?pg=1>

Medicare.gov. Your Medicare Coverage: Mammograms

<https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/mammograms.html>

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