Breast Cancer: Abnormal Mammogram Results and Follow-up

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Breast Cancer

Abnormal Mammogram Results and Follow-up
Hi Carla, have you gotten your mammogram results yet?

Yes, they called me and sent the results in the mail. Everything looked normal. I'm so glad to have that peace of mind.

I haven't received my results yet. I'm getting nervous.

It's been over a week, maybe you should call them.

You know what? Maybe I will. No reason not to, right?

That's right. Here's the phone.
Hello, my name is Brenda Clark. I had a mammogram last Tuesday, and I haven’t heard anything yet. I just wanted to see if the results are available or if you could tell me when I will find out.

Thank you for calling, Ms. Clark. I see that your results are available. I’m going to have Dr. Reed speak to you. One moment, please.

Hello, Ms. Clark? This is Dr. Reed. I’m glad you called to follow-up – not everyone does. The radiologist, who reads and interprets mammograms and other x-rays, sent me your test results.
The mammogram showed some small areas that I am concerned about. We can't say right now if it is cancer or not, but you are going to need to come in for some follow-up testing.

I was worried, Dr. Reed. What did the test show?

Ms. Clark, I know this is not easy to hear. But there is no reason to be worried right now. Call my office to make an appointment when you are ready. You should have the testing done in the next couple of weeks.

Oh my goodness. This is terrible news.
Oh no, Brenda, what did he say?

He was concerned about what my mammogram showed. I need to go for more testing. What if I have cancer!

Oh Brenda, I’m sorry to hear that. But, let’s remember what Denise told us. Less than 1% of women who need more testing after their mammogram end up having cancer.

Yes you can, Brenda! You need to go! We know that delaying testing will delay treatment, if you need it. And that lowers the chances that the treatment will work. If you don’t find out, you can’t do anything about this!

But now I’m scared. Dr. Reed said I need to make an appointment, but I just don’t think I can.
But the treatment probably wouldn’t work anyway.

You don’t know that, Brenda. Think of your family, what would your children do without you? They need you to be strong. You can do this. I’ll be there for you every step of the way.

Oh, my children. I do want to be strong for them. Ok, Carla, I’ll call and make the appointment tomorrow. You know what though, I am going to ask to see a female doctor. I liked Dr. Reed, but I would just feel more comfortable with a woman.

It can’t hurt to ask. Let me know when you’re going, and I’ll find someone to watch my grands.

You’re such a good friend. I really appreciate that.
Hello, Dr. Johnson. I’m Brenda Clark and this is my friend Carla. Thank you for seeing me.

Hello, I’m Dr. Johnson and I will be seeing you today.

Hello, Dr. Johnson. I’m Brenda Clark and this is my friend Carla. Thank you for seeing me.

I hope we don’t have to wait too long to see the doctor, I have lots of questions about what happens if I have breast cancer.

I’m so glad you came in today for your tests, Ms. Clark. I see that you asked for a female doctor. Many women coming in for breast cancer testing prefer to see a female physician, and we understand that.

Dr. Johnson, I’m so worried. Let’s just get this over with. What kind of tests are you going to do?
Is that surgery? Will I have to be unconscious?

No, a needle aspiration is a minor procedure. We will numb the area with a kind of drug called an anesthetic before we insert the needle. You will be awake. It’s possible that you may develop a small bruise later, but there should be very little pain.

What is the difference between a biopsy and a needle aspiration test?

A biopsy involves removing a larger piece of breast tissue, and is often a surgical procedure done in an operating room. A needle aspiration uses a very thin needle to remove fluid or a small group of cells. We will analyze the cells under a microscope to see if they are showing cancerous changes. I think in your case a needle aspiration will be the best test to find out if there are cancer cells.

There are a couple of tests that are used to follow-up on abnormal mammograms. We often do a diagnostic mammogram. This is the same test you had before, but we do more views of your breast this time. Sometimes an ultrasound is needed. During an ultrasound, gel is put on your breast and a wand is gently moved over your breast to produce an image of any cysts or lumps. Breast biopsies or needle aspirations are tests that involve taking a sample of breast tissue to examine.
That test wasn’t so bad. But I am so nervous. Dr. Johnson, what happens if the test shows that I have breast cancer? I found out everything I could about breast cancer treatment after I got my results — I checked the Jefferson Breast Health website and the American Cancer Society website. I also talked to a couple of breast cancer survivors I know, which gave me hope. I know there are a couple of different kinds of treatments, but how will I know what is right for me? How will I pay for everything?

Well first of all, Ms. Clark, I want you to know you are not alone. We will take good care of you and do everything we can. The websites you mentioned are good resources for learning about breast cancer. We also have some materials here in the office that I can give you. As you mentioned, there are a couple types of treatments. The main types include surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy.

Alright, Ms. Clark, the test is all done. I have sent the tissue sample to the pathologist. That’s a kind of doctor who looks at cells and tissues to figure out the cause of diseases. It shouldn’t be too much longer. In the meantime, I thought you might have some questions.
That’s good that they can make a new breast for you right then. I didn’t know they could do that. But what if the whole breast doesn’t need to be removed?

If the whole breast does not need to be removed, a procedure called a lumpectomy can be done. This is when only the cancerous mass is removed, and the rest of the breast remains intact. Sometimes chemotherapy or radiation therapy are done in addition to surgery, and sometimes they are done instead of surgery.

My neighbor had surgery, and they took both of her breasts. Do they always do that?

No, removal of the whole breast or both breasts is not always necessary. Mastectomy, removal of the breast, used to be done a lot more than it is now. Breast reconstruction or breast implants can often be done at the time of the mastectomy.

Doesn’t chemotherapy make you lose your hair?

Chemotherapy, or “chemo” uses medicines that may cause hair loss. But, fewer women on chemo today lose their hair than in the past. Chemo works by killing rapidly dividing cells, like cancer cells. Radiation also kills this kind of cell.
I had no idea so many women survived breast cancer!

Yes, breast cancer treatment today is different than it was 20 or even 10 years ago. Breast cancer is still cancer, but treated early and properly, women today are seeing much better outcomes and surviving to lead full, happy lives.

How well do these treatments work?

That’s good to know. I want to know though, what are my chances of survival if I have breast cancer?

If breast cancer is treated early, over 95% of women survive at least five more years.

Yes, breast cancer treatment today is different for everyone. A woman and her medical team will decide what is best for her based on her individual case. Delaying testing and cancer treatment can reduce your chances of surviving breast cancer. So far you’ve done everything right!
Dr. Johnson, I have the results of Ms. Clark’s test.

Thank you.

Nurse enters...

Wow, I didn’t know that. That’s really something.

This is certainly good news to hear. These treatments sound good, but only if you can afford them. I have Medicaid right now, but I am always worried that I may lose it. I have been uninsured before, and it’s so difficult to get regular medical care without insurance. What if I need treatment for breast cancer?

Pennsylvania has programs, like the Healthy Woman Program, that help women get screened, and get treatment for breast cancer, if needed. If you don’t have health insurance, my staff can refer you to the programs that can help.
Ms. Clark, I am happy to tell you that your test does not show any cancer cells. You do not have breast cancer.

Praise the Lord!

Wonderful! Aren’t you glad you came in to check, Brenda?

I am so glad. I can’t wait to tell my family that everything is fine.

Ok, Ms. Clark, then I will let you go home and do that.
I would still like the breast cancer information you mentioned though, Dr. Johnson.

But you are going to be fine!

I know. But I came in for my mammogram in the first place because of the information I got from my friend Denise. I want to learn as much as I can so I can help other women by telling them about breast health and finding cancer early.

Excellent, Ms. Clark. Here is the information. If you have any questions just give me a call.

Thank you so much, doctor. Carla, let’s get out of here.

But we will be back in a year for our annual mammograms!

We certainly will.
Facts to Remember

• 99 out of 100 women who need follow-up testing will not have breast cancer.
• Don't delay follow up testing and cancer treatment. Delay can reduce your chances of surviving breast cancer.
• Over 95% of women treated for breast cancer survive at least five or more years.

Resources

• Jefferson Easy-To-Use site: JeffersonHospital.org/breastcare
• National Cancer Institute: cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/breast
  or call 1-800-4-cancer (1-800-422-6237)
• BreastCancer.org: www.breastcancer.org
• American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
  or call 1-800-ACS-2345 (1-866-228-4327)
• Medline Easy-to-use Tutorial:
  *(Video available)*
  — www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/breastcancer/htm/yes_50_no_0.htm
• HealthyWoman program
  — www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/healthy_women/14172/healthywoman_program_home/557855
  or call 1-800-215-7494
• Breast and Cervical Cancer Prevention and Treatment Program
  — www.dpw.state.pa.us/ServicesPrograms/MedicalAssistance/BreastCancerScreening/003671495.htm
  call 1-800-215-7494 to find the closest HealthyWoman Program provider

Community Participants

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This is dedicated to all those women who paved the way for breast cancer prevention for women like us.

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