



New Breast Density Legislation: What every woman must know

On previous issues of "Ask the Doctor" I have discussed the topic of [breast density](#) as noted on the mammogram. On April 1, 2013, the issue of breast density is soon to become a major topic of discussion, and every woman will need to rethink how she approaches the issue of breast cancer screening.

New mammography legislation goes into effect on April 1, 2013. This will require radiologists to report the density of the woman's breasts tissue based on the mammographic finding. It will also require physicians to inform women with dense breasts that additional screening may be recommended, and that a range of breast screening options, such as ultrasound and magnetic resonance imaging, are available. This new legislation is based on the fact that women with dense breasts are at an increased risk for developing breast cancer and that screening mammography is less effective at detecting small cancers in women with dense breasts.

Fortunately, the majority of women (60%) have fatty breast tissue on mammographic imaging. In this group of women the yearly screening mammogram is highly effective in detecting small cancers. Therefore women with fatty breasts do not need any additional screening procedures. The rare exceptions are women with a strong [family history of breast cancer or who have had a previous high risk biopsy](#).

For years we have been aware of the limitations of mammograms in women with dense breasts, but until recently we did not have much choice in terms of additional imaging studies. The one exception was the [MRI](#). The combination of mammography and MRI is highly effective in detecting small breast cancers in women with dense breasts. However, the MRI is expensive. Insurance companies only cover the cost of the MRI for very high risk women such as those with the BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations or those with very strong family histories of breast cancer. Additionally, the procedure is not well tolerated by women who have a history of claustrophobia. Finally, the procedure requires an I.V. injection.

The big breakthrough in screening women with dense breasts occurred last year when the [FDA approved a new Ultra-Sound technology](#) for breast screening. This new device has proven to be highly effective in detecting cancers that can't be seen on standard mammographic screening. Also, this new screening device is quick and relatively comfortable. The proposed cost is in the range of 300 dollars. The new legislation does not require insurance companies to cover the cost of ultra-sound screening, but some may choose to do so.

Of course, the good news is that at last we have an imaging device that will pick up most of the small cancers missed on mammographic screening in women with dense breasts. It is important to remember that even with the addition of Ultra-Sound some cancers are still missed, and that most of these cancers are found by the woman herself. Thus, even with this new technology, [breast self-exam](#) is still an important layer of protection.

I hope you share in my excitement for this breakthrough in breast screening. If you have questions or comments, you can contact me at: [Ask The Doctor](#) or [Contact Us](#).