



Breast cancer screening in Australia

Breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting Australian women. In 2020, it is estimated that around 19,800 new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed in Australian women. Of these, around 12,200 (61%) will occur in women aged 50–74, equivalent to 340 new cases per 100,000 women.

The national breast cancer screening program, BreastScreen Australia, aims to reduce morbidity and mortality from breast cancer. The program provides free 2-yearly screening mammograms to women 40 and over, and actively targets women aged 50–74, to detect unsuspected breast cancers in women who have no symptoms.

This fact sheet presents findings from the *BreastScreen Australia monitoring report 2020*, which examines data for women aged 50–74 who were screened between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2018.

What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer most commonly originates in the ducts of the breast (which carry milk from the lobules to the nipple) but can also originate in the lobules (small lobes of the breast that produce milk). More rarely, breast cancer can originate in the connective tissue of the breast.

Invasive breast cancer is a breast tumour whose cells have spread locally and have the potential to spread to nearby healthy or normal tissue or to more distant parts of the body. Ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) is a non-invasive tumour of the breast that arises from the lining of the ducts that carry milk from the milk-producing lobules to the nipple and does not invade the surrounding breast tissues.

The benefits of early diagnosis

Detection of breast cancer at an early stage allows access to diagnostic and treatment services early and can increase treatment options and reduce illness and death from the disease. It also detects breast cancers when they are small (≤ 15 mm) to achieve the desired reduction in morbidity and mortality.

Screening mammography is not intended to be diagnostic; rather, it aims to identify women who are more likely to have breast cancer and would not otherwise know. In screening mammography, two views are taken of each breast, and images are reviewed by radiologists to look for suspicious characteristics that require further investigation. Screening mammograms work well in older women because breasts become less dense as women get older. For this reason, mammographic screening becomes more effective in women aged 50 and over.

Quick facts

Of women aged 50–74:

- **55% (over 1.8 million)** participated in BreastScreen Australia in 2017–2018
- Around **5,600** were diagnosed with invasive breast cancer through BreastScreen Australia in 2018
- Around **3,300 (59%)** of all invasive breast cancers diagnosed through BreastScreen Australia were small (≤ 15 mm) cancers in 2018

61% of all invasive breast cancers diagnosed and **47%** of all breast cancer deaths are estimated to occur in women aged 50–74 in 2020.

How many women were screened and what were the outcomes?

More than 1.8 million women aged 50–74 participated in BreastScreen Australia in 2017–2018. This was 55% of women aged 50–74. Participation has stayed between 54% and 55% since 2010–2011.

In 2018, 11% of women aged 50–74 were recalled to assessment in their first screening round and 3.5% were recalled to assessment in subsequent screening rounds.

How many breast cancers were diagnosed?

In 2018, around 6,500 women were diagnosed with breast cancer through BreastScreen Australia, of whom around 5,600 (87%) were aged 50–74. Of the 5,600 women aged 50–74, almost 800 were attending their first screen (equivalent to 91 women diagnosed per 10,000 women) and around 4,900 were attending subsequent screens (equivalent to 55 women diagnosed per 10,000 women).

In 2018, around 3,300 (59%) of all invasive breast cancers detected through BreastScreen Australia were small (≤ 15 mm) cancers.

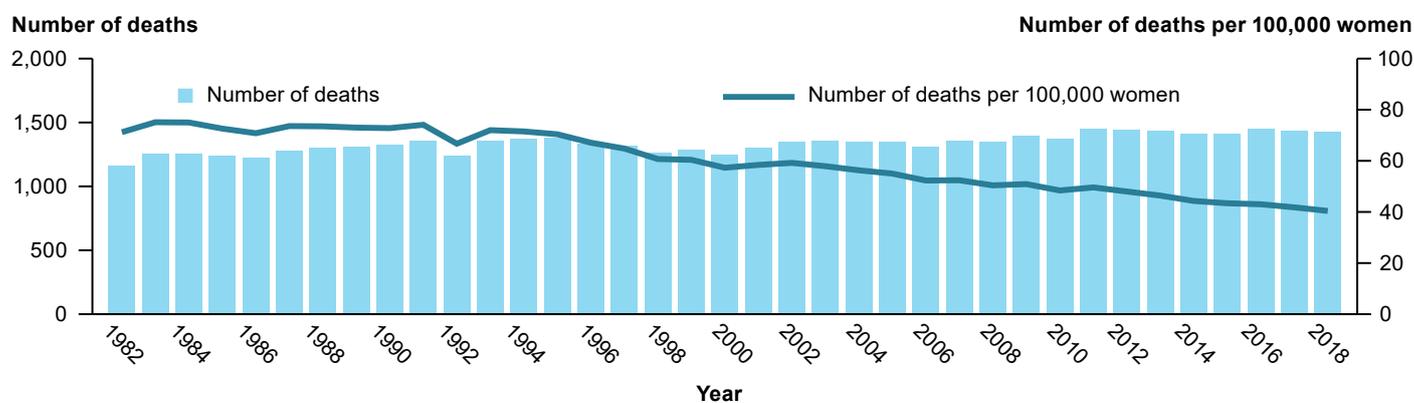
In 2018, around 1,400 women aged 50–74 were diagnosed with ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) through BreastScreen Australia (equivalent to 14 women diagnosed per 10,000 women).

Death rates from breast cancer have decreased since the program began

In 2018, there were around 3,000 deaths from breast cancer in Australian women, of which around 1,400 (47%) occurred in women aged 50–74.

Breast cancer mortality has decreased since BreastScreen Australia began—from 74 deaths per 100,000 women aged 50–74 in 1991 to less than 50 deaths per 100,000 since 2010. The mortality rate was 40 deaths per 100,000 in 2018.

Mortality from breast cancer in women aged 50–74, 1982–2018



Note: Rates age-standardised to the Australian population as at 30 June 2001.

Around 2 in 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women participated

Participation in BreastScreen Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged 50–74 was 38% in 2017–2018, compared with 54% for non-Indigenous women. Indigenous women aged 50–74 had a lower incidence rate of breast cancer than non-Indigenous women (251 compared with 303 new cases per 100,000) but a higher mortality rate (47 compared with 42 deaths per 100,000). In 2011–2015, Indigenous women aged 50–74 diagnosed with breast cancer had a 78% chance of surviving for 5 years, up from 73% in 2001–2005.

More information is available from *BreastScreen Australia monitoring report 2020*.