Australian Government
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Breast cancer screening in Australia

BreastScreen Australia monitoring 2019

Breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting Australian women and is the second most common cause of cancer-related death in women, behind lung cancer.

It is estimated that more than 19,300 new cases of breast cancer were diagnosed in Australia in 2019, or about 53 every day.

Early detection of breast cancer gives women more treatment options, which can reduce illness and death. The national breast cancer screening program, BreastScreen Australia, offers free screening mammograms to women aged 40 and over every 2 years. This service aims to detect breast cancer in its early stages.

This fact sheet presents findings from the *BreastScreen Australia monitoring report 2019* that examines data for women in the program's target age range of 50–74 who were screened between 1 January 2016 and 31 December 2017.

Quick facts

The breast cancer death rate in the target age group has fallen since BreastScreen Australia began—from **74 deaths per 100,000** women aged 50–74 in 1991 to **fewer than 50 deaths per 100,000** since 2010.

Of women aged **50–74**:

- **55% (about 1.8 million)** participated in BreastScreen Australia between January 2016 and December 2017
- around **10,400** were diagnosed with breast cancer in 2015 and **around 1,400** died from the disease in 2017.

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, it can originate in the connective tissue of the breast.

Invasive breast cancers are tumours 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, such as the liver, brain, bones, or lungs. Non-invasive tumours can also occur in cells lining the ducts, these are commonly referred to as DCIS.

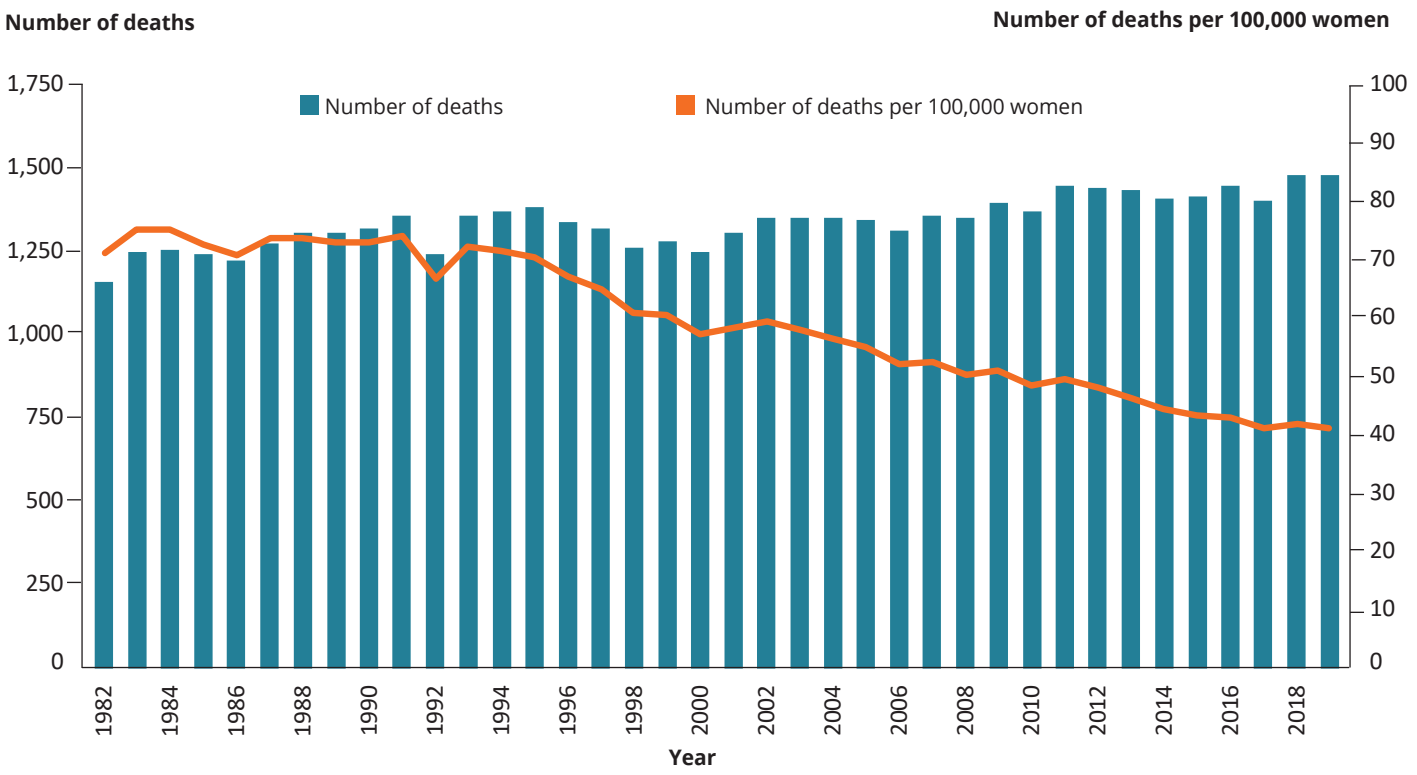
Why is screening mammography important?

Screening mammography is an X-ray examination of a woman's breasts. It can diagnose cancers in women who have no symptoms and therefore would not otherwise know they have the disease. Two views are taken of each breast, and the images are reviewed by radiologists to see if there is anything that requires further investigation.

Screening mammography works well in older women because breasts become less dense as women get older. For this reason, mammographic screening is not recommended for women under 40.

Screening mammography can detect cancers as small as a grain of rice. Small breast cancers tend to be associated with more treatment options, lower morbidity and improved survival. In 2017, more than half (59%) of the cancers detected by BreastScreen Australia were small, compared with just 28% of cancers detected outside the program.

Figure 1: Mortality from breast cancer over time



More women are surviving a breast cancer diagnosis

At the end of 2014, there were over 44,000 women aged 50–74 alive who had been diagnosed with breast cancer in the previous 5 years and over 76,000 who had been diagnosed in the previous 10 years.

Breast cancer survival rates have improved over time. Between 1986–1990 and 2011–2015, for women in the target age group diagnosed with breast cancer, the chance of surviving for 5 years (when compared with their counterparts in the general population) increased from 74% to 93%.

A project examining long-term data from women diagnosed with breast cancer in 2002–2012 found that those who had been diagnosed through BreastScreen Australia had a lower risk of dying from breast cancer than women who had never screened.

The death rate from breast cancer has fallen since BreastScreen Australia began. It is estimated that this rate will fall further to 41 deaths per 100,000 women in 2019, compared with 74 per 100,000 in 1991.

How many women were screened?

More than 1.8 million women aged 50–74 had a screening mammogram through BreastScreen Australia in 2016–2017. This was 55% of women in the target age group. Participation has stayed between 54% and 55% since 2010–2011.

Indigenous women have lower screening rates and poorer outcomes

In 2016–2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged 50–74 were less likely to participate in BreastScreen Australia than non-Indigenous women—41% compared with 54%, respectively.

Indigenous women in the target age group were 1.1 times as likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer and 1.2 times as likely to die from the disease as non-Indigenous women.

More information is available from *BreastScreen Australia monitoring report 2019.*