Dense Breast Tissue and Your Mammogram

What does it mean to have dense breast tissue?
Breasts are a mix of 2 types of tissue that show up differently on a mammogram. Fibroglandular tissue looks white, and fatty tissue looks black. Dense breast tissue has equal or more white tissue compared to black. This can make it harder to read a mammogram, because a mass (whether benign or cancerous) appears white and can be masked by background tissue.

Is it common to have dense breast tissue?
Yes, this is normal and related to hormone changes that occur naturally over a woman’s lifetime. Six out of 10 women have dense breast tissue in their 30s and 40s. By age 70, fewer women (only 3 out of 10) will have dense breast tissue. Exposure to estrogen, such as hormone replacement therapy, can stop or reverse the typical drop in breast density that happens with age.

Do I still need a mammogram if I have dense breast tissue?
Yes. A mammogram is still the best screening exam to detect breast cancer. It’s the only screening test that’s been proven to save lives by finding breast cancer early.

Do I need any other exams for dense breast tissue?
No, because breast density is not a major cancer risk factor. If you’re of average risk, have dense breast tissue, and your mammogram is normal, you don’t need additional exams.

What should I do if I think I’m at higher risk for breast cancer?
Discuss your risk with your doctor if one or more of the following applies to you:

- You had chest radiation treatment in the past
- You or a family member have tested positive for an inherited breast cancer gene mutation
- You have several close relatives diagnosed with breast cancer at a young age (under age 60) and/or ovarian cancer

Why am I learning about this now?
Breast density has always been one of the many factors we consider when reading a mammogram. As of 2013, California law requires that all women who have dense breast tissue be notified. This way, you may learn about breast density, including limitations on reading mammograms, and breast cancer risk.

For more information on breast health, including screening guidelines, go to kpdoc.org/breastdensity.