

Biopsy basics

If you develop a breast lump or other breast change, or if you have an abnormal finding on a mammogram, you may need to have a biopsy. A biopsy is a procedure that removes a sample of cells or tissue from the breast. The cells or tissue that have been removed are examined under a microscope to look for signs of cancer. A biopsy is generally not painful because a local anesthetic (medicine that blocks pain in the area) is used.

There are two main types of biopsies: *needle biopsy* and *surgical biopsy*. The type of biopsy you will have depends mainly on the nature and location of the breast abnormality and your general health and preference.

Most women who have a biopsy are not diagnosed with breast cancer. Even so, you may want to bring a friend or family member with you for support and to drive you home.



Needle biopsy

Because it is fast and simple, this method is often done first. If your doctor cannot feel the lump, special equipment is used to guide the needle to the area.

Fine needle aspiration (also known as FNA or fine needle biopsy) — A thin needle is used to remove cells from the breast lump. It can be done in an outpatient setting and only takes a few minutes.

Core needle biopsy — A thin, hollow needle is used to remove a small amount of tissue from the breast. It can be used on both suspicious areas that can be felt and those that can only be seen on a mammogram, breast ultrasound or MRI. The skin is nicked with a scalpel so the needle can enter. This type of needle biopsy is done with local anesthetic in an outpatient setting.

Vacuum assisted biopsy — A thicker, hollow needle removes cores of tissue with a single insertion of a vacuum assisted probe. This type of needle biopsy may be done with the guidance of stereotactic mammography or ultrasound imaging. Vacuum assisted breast biopsy is done under a local anesthetic in an outpatient setting.

Surgical biopsy

A surgical biopsy removes the abnormality from the breast. It is done in a hospital or outpatient setting with local anesthesia and sedation. Most women go home the same day.

Excisional biopsy — The entire lump plus some surrounding normal tissue are removed. This is the most common type of surgical biopsy and the most accurate way to diagnose breast cancer. Although the primary purpose is to diagnose cancer, an excisional biopsy may be the only surgery needed.

Types of biopsy	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>needle biopsy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fine needle • core needle • vacuum assisted breast biopsy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simple procedure — can be done in an outpatient setting and may use mammographic or ultrasound guidance • accurate • quicker than surgical biopsy • local anesthetic is used to prevent pain • results available within 48-72 hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surgical biopsy may still be needed • does not remove all of the lump • if needle misses the tumor, the biopsy will show cancer is not present when in fact it is (false negative result) which could delay diagnosis (not common) • <i>fine needle only</i>: requires cytopathologist to review the results • <i>fine needle only</i>: cannot fully distinguish non-invasive from invasive cancer
<p>surgical biopsy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • excisional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • takes about an hour • more accurate than needle biopsy • provides more information for treatment plan • may remove entire lump • might be the only surgery needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a surgical procedure • possible side effects such as infection or blood collection under the skin, scarring and changes in the breast contour • removing tissue can change the look and feel of the breast

Questions to ask your doctor

You should be able to talk openly and honestly with your doctor to make sure all of your questions are answered. To help you get started, Susan G. Komen for the Cure® has series of 14 *Questions to Ask the Doctor* inserts on a variety of breast cancer topics including Biopsy. Some examples of questions include:

- What type of biopsy will I have? Why do you prefer this method?
- How much of the lump will be removed?

- How long will the biopsy take? Can I go home the same day?
- What possible side effects should I report to you?
- How soon will I know the results of the biopsy?
- How can I get a copy of the pathology report?
- Where will my tissue be stored? How can I access it in the future?

These questions will help your doctor understand and address your specific concerns. You can download and print any of these cards to take to your next doctor's appointment at www.komen.org/questions

Resources

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Detection
- Breast Surgery
- Mammography
- Prognostic Factors
- Types of Breast Cancer Tumors
- When the Diagnosis is Cancer — An Overview