

## **Breast cancer awareness is important, but mammograms can save lives**

In New York state, 83% of individuals who are recommended to have a mammogram are following the state's screening guidelines, a percentage that's been stable for two decades according to a review of state data by Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. That means a persistent number of individuals (17%) are non-compliant and putting their lives at risk. According to data self-reported to the state, of those who have not had a mammogram within the past two years, 92.2% had health insurance and 83.4% had a regular health care provider.

"Maybe we should change October from Breast Cancer Awareness Month to Mammogram Month since, while awareness is important, detecting breast cancer early with a mammogram can save someone's life," says Lorna Fitzpatrick, MD, Excellus BCBS vice president of medical affairs and senior medical director. A mammogram can detect breast cancer at its earliest stages when treatment is most successful.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for every 100,000 women in the United States, there will be 124 reported cases of breast cancer and 20 deaths from the disease. In New York state, breast cancer is the most diagnosed form of cancer, with approximately 16,500 new cases and 2,500 deaths each year.

New York state guidelines recommend a mammogram every two years for individuals aged 50 to 74 who should be screened. Those who are 40 to 49 years of age, those with a family history or other risk factors for breast cancer, and those who have any symptoms or changes in their breasts should talk to their health care provider about the most appropriate screening schedule.

New York's "Get Screened, No Excuses" legislation, signed in 2017, eliminated out-of-pocket costs and many access issues associated with breast health care and services, including mammograms (the law does not apply to self-funded health insurance plans).

"With so much attention given to breast cancer awareness, and so many barriers removed to getting a mammogram, there should be 100% compliance with screening guidelines," says Fitzpatrick. "Sadly, that's not the case."

Mammography rates across 39 counties of upstate New York average 77.9%, or about five points lower than the state average (83%) for individuals aged 50 to 74.

### **Screening rates by upstate New York region:**

- Western New York – 78.4%
- Rochester Region – 75.9%
- Central New York – 80.9%
- Southern Tier Region – 76.0%
- Utica Region – 78.3%

Source: [www.health.ny.gov](https://www.health.ny.gov)

Says Fitzpatrick, "It's great that so much energy is directed toward breast cancer awareness, but awareness needs to translate to action. Mammograms detect breast cancer early, when treatment has a higher rate of success and lives can be saved."