

## Questions to ask your doctor

The questions below may help you talk to your doctor.

- What type of biopsy will I have? Why?
- Will the entire lump be removed or just part of it?
- What side effects might I expect afterwards?
- When will I get the results?
- If I have breast cancer, who will talk with me about my treatment options?

Susan G. Komen® has a [Questions to Ask the Doctor](#) series on many breast cancer topics, including biopsies. You can download and print these questions to take with you to your next appointment.

## Biopsy basics

A **biopsy** removes cells or tissue from the breast. The cells or tissue are viewed under a microscope to check for cancer. A biopsy is the only test that can diagnose or confirm breast cancer.

You may need a biopsy, if you have:

- A breast lump or other breast change
- An abnormal finding on your [screening mammogram](#)

If you need a biopsy, try not to worry. Most biopsies in the U.S. don't show breast cancer.

**There are 2 main types of biopsies: needle and surgical.**



### Needle biopsy

A needle biopsy uses a hollow needle to remove samples of tissue or cells from the breast. The doctor will use a local anesthetic (medicine that blocks pain) to numb the area. You may be a little sore afterwards. You may want to bring a friend or family member for support and to drive you home.

**Core needle biopsy** can be used for breast lumps you can feel, and areas only seen on a mammogram or other imaging test. A core needle biopsy is the standard method used to diagnose (or rule out) breast cancer.

**Fine needle aspiration** (also known as FNA or fine needle biopsy) is only used for lumps that can be felt. FNA is sometimes done as a quick way to sample a breast lump.

### Surgical biopsy

Although core needle biopsy is the standard and preferred way to diagnose breast cancer, some people need a surgical biopsy for diagnosis. Usually, the whole abnormal area (plus some of the normal tissue around it) is removed.

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This fact sheet is intended to be a brief overview. For more information, visit [komen.org](http://komen.org) or call Susan G. Komen's Breast Care Helpline at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. ET, or email at [helpline@komen.org](mailto:helpline@komen.org). Se habla español.

## Resources

**Susan G. Komen®**  
1-877 GO KOMEN  
(1-877-465-6636)  
[komen.org](http://komen.org)

## Related educational resources:

- [Breast Cancer Prognosis for Early Breast Cancer](#)
- [Breast Cancer Screening and Follow-up Tests](#)
- [Breast Cancer Surgery](#)

Types of biopsy	Procedure Information	
<b>Core needle biopsy</b> (standard and preferred biopsy method for diagnosis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick, but uncomfortable</li> <li>• Very small, if any, incision (cut in the skin)</li> <li>• Small chance of infection or bruising</li> <li>• Can be used to check lumps and abnormal areas found on other tests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually done in a hospital or imaging center (if the lump can't be felt, image guidance is used during the biopsy)</li> <li>• Can usually tell non-invasive breast cancers from invasive breast cancers, but may not give a full description of the tumor</li> <li>• If findings are not cancer, may avoid surgery</li> </ul>
<b>Fine needle aspiration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick, fairly painless</li> <li>• No incision</li> <li>• Small chance of infection or bruising</li> <li>• Can be done in a doctor's office</li> <li>• Less accurate than a core needle or surgical biopsy</li> <li>• Needle can miss a tumor and take a sample of normal cells instead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not recommended for abnormal areas only seen on mammogram (when the abnormal area can't be felt)</li> <li>• Can't distinguish noninvasive from invasive breast cancers</li> <li>• Doesn't give a full description of the tumor</li> <li>• Experienced breast cytopathologist is needed (a doctor who specializes in looking at cells under a microscope)</li> </ul>
<b>Surgical biopsy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More invasive than a needle biopsy (a surgical procedure)</li> <li>• Takes time to heal from surgery</li> <li>• Greater chance for infection and bruising than with needle biopsy</li> <li>• Can change the look of the breast</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Done in a hospital with local anesthesia sedation</li> <li>• Can give full information about the tumor</li> <li>• May be the only surgery needed to remove the tumor</li> <li>• Most women can go home the same day</li> </ul>

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