

Breast screening for women with learning disabilities

Information for carers

All women aged between 50 and 70 years, registered with a doctor, are invited every three years to undertake a mammogram. Mammograms can identify cancer before it can be felt.

The county council's community learning disability nurses are working in partnership with the NHS breast screening service to encourage the take up of this service by women with learning disabilities.

We hope this guide will be useful for people who are carers.

Doctors' surgeries give the breast screening service a list of the women between 50 and 70 who are registered with them. The service then sends out an invitation letter giving details of the mobile screening unit, where it will be, the date and time to go.



There is usually a steep set of steps to get into a mobile unit, and the maximum time a nurse can spend with each woman is six minutes. For these reasons mobile units are often not suitable for women with learning disabilities or with physical disabilities, so we recommend that making an appointment at the breast screening service in Luton (details at the end).



Working together





Pictured above, the Breast Screening Unit at Luton

The clinic in Luton is rather different. There is more space and the nurses there can give each woman more personal time. Also at Luton the pictures can be checked for accuracy straight away and a second set done if necessary. This means that another appointment won't be needed.

Women with learning disabilities should automatically get an appointment at the Luton clinic. But if the appointment has been made with a mobile unit, you will want consider the following points and if necessary change the appointment to the Luton clinic.

A WOMAN WILL BE ABLE TO HAVE A MAMMOGRAM IF:

- 1. She can hold her head up and can hold her arms clear of her chest while the mammogram is taken.**

If the woman is a wheelchair user and is unable to stand, a mammogram won't be possible.

- 2. She can understand what is going to happen.**

The woman must be able to understand what being asked of her and give her agreement. If she can't understand what the nurse is saying sufficiently, extra support is available from the unit or through your local Community Learning Disability team.

3. She is unlikely to become anxious in an unfamiliar environment.

To overcome this the clinic is happy to have women coming in to see the clinic and the equipment before their actual appointment for a mammogram. Carers will need to think carefully about the timing of the appointment, for example not over a meal time and how they can help with preparing the woman and what they will do if the woman becomes anxious.

4. She can understand and comply with simple requests.

The nurses will need the woman to follow simple instructions so that the mammogram can be taken. Carers will need to be ready to support nurses in this if necessary.

5. She can tolerate people touching her.

In order for the nurses to make sure that they get a clear mammogram picture they need to support the woman to place her breast into the machine, and it can take a few minutes to get a correct position.

6. She can remain still for a few minutes

She will need to hold a position for a few minutes



7. She can tolerate some discomfort

To take a mammogram picture of the breast tissue, each breast is placed between two pieces of glass and gently compressed. This can be uncomfortable, and many woman instinctively try and pull away. It can be reassuring if the carer stands beside her, but protective clothing from the x-rays will be necessary.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Wear a separate top and skirt/trousers.
- Wear a top that is easy to remove.
- Think about how to support a woman to stay as calm as possible
- If you are the main carer and a man, you will probably want to make arrangements for another woman to lend her support, help with undressing etc...

GETTING IN CONTACT

If you feel that the woman you are supporting may have difficulties in having a mammogram please contact:

- **Breast Screening Service**
Lewsey Road
Luton LU4 0EY
Telephone 01582 497599

Make sure you tell the staff the woman's name and address of her doctor

- **Your local community learning disability team**
Porters Lodge
Collett Road
Ware
SG12 7LY
Telephone 01920 880904

From summer 2005 GPs will be expected to identify patients with learning disabilities and to offer them a health action plan that encourages the use of mainstream NHS services and provides support where necessary. This is part of the NHS modernisation programme to improve access to healthcare for disadvantaged groups of people.

BREAST AWARENESS

A small number of breast cancers do not show up on x-ray, so it is important for women to carry out regular self-examination of their breasts, particularly if they are over 50 and/or breast cancer runs in the family.

Please consult a GP if any breast changes are noticed.

All women should be encouraged to get to know their own bodies so that they notice changes. Bathing and drying is a good time to do this, and for those women with learning disabilities who can do this, they should be shown how to feel and look for changes. If a woman is not able to do this for herself, then a carer who provides personal care should do a **visual check** regularly.

Look for:

- Appearance - any change in the outline or shape of the breast, or any puckering or dimpling of the skin.
- Feelings - any signs of pain or discomfort in the breast when touched or on movement.
- Lumps - any lumps, thickening or bumpy areas in one breast or armpit which seem to be different from the same part on the other breast or armpit.
- Nipple change - any nipple discharge, bleeding or moist reddish areas which don't heal easily should be checked out. Any change in nipple position - pulled in or pointing differently or nipple rash should also be checked out by your doctor.

You may want to get leaflets on breast awareness - you can order these from the Health Promotion Library. Telephone **01707 281685** or look on the website **www.nhsinherts.nhs.uk/hp**

Further advice and support, and more copies of this factsheet is available from Louise Jenkins, senior learning disabilities community nurse, using the contact details for East Herts and Broxbourne CLDT on page 4. Or visit **www.hertsdirect.org/ldhealth**