Understanding Your Breast Thermogram Report

Complicated health care procedures and reports are often difficult to understand. We hope that the following answers to frequently asked questions will help make things clearer.

My images are graded as a TH4. What does this mean?

Thermograms at this level are considered abnormal. Breast thermograms are graded on a scale from TH1 to TH5. As TH values rise from TH3 and above there is increasing risk that an abnormal process might be present, or that you may be at a higher risk for cancer in the future.

- TH 1 – Normal image without vascularity (blood vessels)
- TH 2 – Normal image with vascularity
- TH 3 – Equivocal (questionable, but not abnormal)
- TH 4 – Abnormal
- TH 5 – Very abnormal

An abnormal thermogram may be indicating that something is going on. First, it’s possible that this may be a signal that a cancer is in need of a blood supply. In order to investigate this, and to protect your health, further testing is strongly recommended. Depending on any recent imaging you may have had, a follow up mammogram, ultrasound, or MRI would be recommended. Please see your doctor for follow up testing.

Another possibility is that the thermogram may be acting as a warning sign or it may be a false-positive. If your follow up tests show no suspicious findings, and the thermogram remains abnormal over time, the thermogram may be a future warning of higher risk. This warning may give you a chance to make changes. It lets you know that you need to work closely with your doctor to carefully monitor your breasts and make positive changes that will decrease your risk factors and improve your breast health. It is also very important to return for follow up thermograms. The initial follow up is usually recommended at 3 months with a second 6 months later. If no thermal changes are seen, follow up thermograms are recommended every 6 months until improvements are noted.

My report says that I need to have a mammogram, ultrasound, or MRI. Why do I need one?

A thermogram cannot locate the exact area of suspicion inside the breast. You need some form of structural imaging to investigate the findings on your thermogram. A logical sequence of testing needs to be followed in order to protect your health. This is the same action that would be taken if you had a suspicious mammogram. Neither mammograms, ultrasounds, MRI nor thermograms can tell you if you have cancer, further tests are always necessary to investigate this possibility.

I have a lump, pain, imaging (mammogram, ultrasound, MRI, etc.) or other finding in the normal thermogram breast. Does this mean that I don’t have cancer?

No, a normal thermogram does not mean an absence of cancer. Only a biopsy can tell you if you have cancer or not. Approximately 10% of all breast cancers have no abnormal thermal features. Studies show that many of these “cold” cancers have a much better prognosis. However, if you have a lump, pain, imaging or other finding you should see your doctor immediately to determine what it is.
The report mentioned a blood vessel pattern that may be caused by hormones or dietary phytoestrogens. What does this mean?

Certain thermographic signs may suggest the effects of hormones in the breasts. Since current research indicates that the single greatest risk factor for the development of breast cancer is lifetime exposure to the hormone estrogen, reducing the overall lifetime exposure of the breast to estrogen may play an important role in breast cancer prevention. Thermography may be the first signal that alerts your doctor to this possibility.

It has been shown that a specific blood vessel pattern found on a thermogram may be an indication of hormone imbalance in the breast, most commonly an overabundance of estrogen. The causes of this may be due to one or more factors that may include an over production of estrogen, under production of progesterone, prescription hormone use, or a combination of these and other factors. This is why it is necessary for you to see your doctor for further testing to first verify if there is a hormone imbalance and then to determine the cause. If the tests come back positive for an imbalance, your doctor will use these tests to monitor your treatment.

Phytoestrogens such as soy and flaxseed have also been shown to produce this same blood vessel patterning. Considering that the identical thermal signs produced by an overabundance of estrogen may be caused by phytoestrogens, a certain level of concern is reasonable. In most patients, it is observed that when soy or flaxseed use is stopped the blood vessel patterning reduces significantly or disappears altogether. Many women also report that their breast pains, tenderness, and swelling resolve when they stop using phytoestrogens. If you are currently using soy, flaxseed, or other phytoestrogens, it is recommended that you see your doctor to evaluate whether or not their use is compatible with your physiology.

What does all the information in the findings section mean?

This area of the report contains the results from the computerized analysis of your images. Most of this data was used to determine your TH rating. Please do not let this area concern you. This information is intended for your doctor’s use.

My report says that I should return for another thermogram at a certain date. Is this important?

Yes, this is extremely important. Thermography is very different from other imaging procedures. It has the ability to detect subtle signs of blood vessel changes (angiogenesis) in the breast – blood vessels that may be involved with the growth of a cancerous tumor. These changes may occur far in advance of the formation of a large tumor mass. This makes the procedure one of the earliest risk indicators of a growing cancer. The images produced are also as unique as your fingerprint. Studies show that by carefully monitoring an individual’s “thermal fingerprint” early detection may be enhanced. This is especially important in patients with a TH4 thermogram.

There are 4 very important reasons for you to return for regular thermograms:

1.) EARLY SIGNS THAT A BREAST CANCER MAY BE DEVELOPING
Angiogenesis, or new blood vessel formation, is necessary to sustain the growth of a tumor. Breast thermography may be the first signal that such a possibility is developing.

2.) INDIVIDUALIZED BREAST CANCER RISK ASSESSMENT
Women with a family history are definitely at greater risk for breast cancer, but 75% of women who get breast cancer have no family history of the disease. Regardless of your family history, if a thermogram is abnormal you run a future risk of breast cancer that is 10 times higher than a first order family history of the disease. If discovered, certain thermographic risk markers may warn a woman that she needs to work closely with her doctor with regular checkups to monitor her breast health.
3.) A POSSIBLE ROLE IN BREAST CANCER PREVENTION

Since the single greatest risk factor for the development of breast cancer is lifetime exposure to estrogen, normalizing the balance of the hormones in the breast may be an important step in prevention. Certain thermographic signs may suggest the effects of hormones in the breasts. This may be the first marker that alerts your doctor to this possibility. Your doctor will first need to run further tests to confirm this. If these tests are positive, your doctor may use these tests to monitor your care.

4.) IMAGING FOR YOUNGER WOMEN

Current reports indicate that 15% of all breast cancers occur in women under 49. This is the most common cancer in women in this age group. Breast cancers in younger women are usually more aggressive and have poorer survival rates. Breast thermography offers younger women a valuable imaging tool that they can add to their regular breast health check-ups beginning with baseline imaging at age 20.

**Please read:** Breast thermography offers women information that no other procedure can provide. However, breast thermography is not a replacement for or alternative to mammography or any other form of breast imaging. Breast thermography is meant to be used in addition to mammography and other tests or procedures. Breast thermography and mammography are complementary procedures, one test does not replace the other. All thermography reports are meant to identify thermal emissions that suggest potential risk markers only and do not in any way suggest diagnosis and/or treatment. Studies show that the earliest detection is realized when multiple tests are used together. This multimodal approach includes breast self-examinations, physical breast exams by a doctor, mammography, ultrasound, MRI, thermography, and other tests that may be ordered by your doctor.

Current American Cancer Society guidelines recommend yearly screening mammograms and clinical breast exams beginning at age 40. Please see your doctor to make appointments for these yearly exams. However, if you notice any changes in your breasts, call your doctor as soon as possible. Do not wait until your next mammogram or thermogram appointment.