



Breakthrough Test for Breast Cancer Risk

If you wonder how likely you are to get breast cancer, the new Halo "breast pap" test can give you and your doctor a clue, I heard from Jonathan Herman, MD, assistant clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City. *How it works:* A pumplike device uses heat, massage and suction to attempt to extract fluid (called *nipple aspirate fluid* or NAF) from the breasts' milk ducts, where 90% of cancers originate. The five-minute test involves some mild discomfort, though generally much less than a mammogram.

About one in two women tested will not produce any NAF during the exam. The absence of NAF is a good sign, as it indicates that you probably are not at any increased risk for breast cancer. Women who do produce fluid generally have about twice the average risk for the disease because any NAF indicates that the duct system is irritated -- and such irritation is a possible red flag. Any NAF produced is next analyzed under a microscope. In about 1% to 2% of cases, this analysis reveals abnormal cells in the NAF -- which suggests that the woman's breast cancer risk is four to five times higher than average.

Understanding your results: Having abnormal cells in your NAF does *not* mean that you have cancer or that you will definitely get cancer. Rather, it alerts your doctor to the possible need for more frequent mammograms and perhaps other screening tests (ultrasounds, MRIs) to maximize the chances of detecting cancer early if it does develop. Depending on your other risk factors, your physician may consider starting you on medication such as *tamoxifen* or *raloxifene* to decrease your risk.

Who should get tested: The Halo test, which is FDA-cleared as an annual risk-assessment tool, is appropriate for non-lactating women age 25 to 55... and for older women who have dense breasts (because mammography is less accurate for them) or who produced NAF on a previous Halo test. *Cost:* About \$75 to \$150, a portion of which may be covered by insurance. To see if a doctor near you provides the test, call 877-425-6727 or visit www.NeoMatrix.com.

Source: Jonathan Herman, MD, is an assistant clinical professor in the department of obstetrics and gynecology and women's health at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and an ob/gyn in private practice, both in New York City.