



False alarms

By GP and health broadcaster Dr Sarah Jarvis.

Breast cancer screening uses an X-ray called a mammogram to look for cancers that are too small to feel. It looks for abnormalities that may be a sign of cancer, like specks of calcium or tiny lumps.

According to the NHS, for every 100 women it screens around 96 won't show any abnormalities – so they get the all clear.

The remaining four women are referred for further scans, and sometimes a biopsy, to find out if they have the disease. Three of them will be given the all clear.

False alarms like this happen because mammograms are complex to interpret. For example, a harmless scar and a suspicious calcium deposit can look similar.

That leaves one woman out of the original 100, who is correctly diagnosed with breast cancer.

And what about the 96 women given the all clear? Well there's a small chance their result might be wrong.

According to the NHS, for every 2,400 women who are told they are fine after screening, one has a breast cancer that's missed – although some doctors claim warning signs are missed more regularly than that.

Getting a so-called 'false negative' result will give this woman a false sense of security – and that could be dangerous, if she doesn't keep checking for lumps.