

Understanding Mammography

Confused about mammograms? Don't be. They are the most effective tool for detecting breast cancer early, when it's easier to treat. In fact, mammograms can detect lumps years before they can be felt in a clinical or breast self-exam. Did you know that breast cancer currently accounts for one out of three cancer diagnoses in the United States? According to the American Cancer Society, nearly 180,000 women in the United States will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer in 2007, and more than 40,000 will die of the disease.

But the earlier these cancers are found, the better the patient's chances for successful treatment. That's why mammography is so important. Regular screening mammograms are the best way to detect breast cancer early, when it is easiest to treat. Mammography followed by appropriate treatment can prevent thousands of breast cancer deaths each year.

What are the screening guidelines?

The American Cancer Society's guidelines for early detection of breast cancer recommend:

- Women 20 and older should perform monthly breast self-exams.
- Women age 20-39 should undergo clinical breast exams every three years.
- At age 40, women should have baseline mammograms, and then have annual mammograms and clinical breast exams every year thereafter. Women with a family history of breast cancer should check with their physicians about mammography scheduling.

How are mammograms performed?

During a mammogram, the breast is pressed between two plates for about 20 seconds while X-rays are taken. This may cause some discomfort, but it is generally not painful. Pressing the breast between the plates is necessary to get a clear picture of the breast.

During the X-ray procedure, very low levels of radiation are used. In fact, one mammogram exposes a woman to roughly the same amount of radiation as flying from New York to California on a jet plane.

There are two types of mammograms. Screening mammography is used to look for breast disease in women who appear to have no breast health problems. Diagnostic mammograms are used when women have symptoms.

Watch for these symptoms

Women should also know and look for the symptoms of breast cancer. They include:

- Lump or thickness in the breast
- Swelling in part of the breast
- Skin irritation or dimpling
- Nipple pain or the nipple turning inward
- Redness or scaliness of the nipple or breast skin
- Nipple discharge other than breast milk
- Lump in the underarm area

If you find a lump in your breast, see your physician immediately. Although eight out of 10 breast lumps are non-cancerous, every lump should be examined.

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