

## Mammograms

### What is it?

Mammography is a low dose X-ray that is used to take images of the breasts. Doctors use it to help detect and diagnose breast disease in women. Mammography can find changes in the breast up to two years before you or your physician can feel them. This means that breast cancer may be found in an earlier, more treatable stage.

The American Cancer Society advises women 40 and older to have a mammogram performed annually since the risk of breast cancer increases as a woman gets older. If you have a family history of breast cancer, your doctor may advise that you start having mammograms at an earlier age.

### How do I prepare?

The best time to schedule your mammogram for the week following your period. This is because your period may cause your breasts to be more sensitive and tender than usual.

If there's a possibility that you are pregnant your doctor or the technologist must be informed prior to the test being conducted. Other preparations that you should make are:

- Do not wear deodorant, powder or lotion under your arms or on your breasts. They can appear on your mammogram as calcium spots.
- Tell your doctor and the technologist of any breast symptoms or problems that you have been experiencing.
- If you had any mammograms at other facilities, bring copies of the films with you so that the radiologist can compare the results.

You will be asked to remove all jewelry and clothing above the waist before the exam. A gown or loose fitting material that opens in the front will be provided.

### How is the procedure performed?

You will stand in front of the X-ray machine, and the technologist will place your breast between two plastic/plexiglass plates. The plates press your breast as flat as possible for clear images to be taken. This compression will cause you to feel pressure on the breast. Let your technologist know if you are experiencing significant discomfort so the compression can be lessened.

The technologist will position your body and arm in a way that will help the images come out as clear as possible. The technologist will then go behind a glass shield to take the images. You will be asked to change positions slightly between images.

A screening mammogram takes views of both breasts and usually takes about 30 minutes. You will be asked to wait while the technologist views the images to see if more are needed.

### **Advances in mammography**

Some facilities offer digital mammography for their patients. This technology works like digital photography in that images are generated and stored on a computer. A digital mammogram still requires compression of the breast tissue just like a film version.

Another advance in mammography is computer-aided detection (CAD). This system takes the digitized image of the breast and uses special software to look for problem areas such as calcification, masses or areas that are denser than surrounding tissue. When detected, the computer will then highlight that area so that the radiologist can take a closer look.

### **Diagnostic mammography**

If you or your doctor find a breast lump or suspicious area in your breast, you may need to have a diagnostic mammogram. This type of mammogram differs from a screening mammogram in that it looks specifically at the breast in question to evaluate what was found during a physical examination or during a screening mammogram.

### **Frequently asked questions**

#### ***I have breast implants. Can I still have a screening mammogram?***

Please tell us when you make your appointment if you have breast implants. In some cases, the implants may hide some breast tissue and cause problems in reading the mammogram. In some cases, you may not qualify for a screening mammogram.

#### ***Is there anything I should do other than have an annual mammogram?***

In addition to annual mammograms, the American Cancer Society also recommends clinical breast examinations by a trained health professional and monthly breast self exams beginning at age 20. Clinical breast exams should be done every three years until age 40 and then once a year.

#### ***What are the symptoms of breast cancer?***

Breast cancer may not cause any symptoms in its earlier stages. The most common sign is a lump or thickening in the breast. Other symptoms may include:

- Swelling in part of the breast,
- Skin irritation or dimpling of the skin
- Nipple pain or the nipple turning inward
- Redness or dry, flaky skin around the nipple or on the breast
- Nipple discharge (other than breast milk)
- Lump in your underarm area

#### ***When will I get my results?***

Your mammogram will be read by a radiologist, a physician specially trained to look at X-ray images including mammograms. A written report of the findings will be sent to your physician. You will receive written notification of your results as well.

#### ***What if you find something?***

If the radiologist sees something on your mammogram that needs further studies, you and your doctor will be notified so that we can schedule a more complete diagnostic study. Please remember that not everything found on a mammogram is cancer. Other tests such as breast ultrasound, MRI and biopsy may be needed to help your doctor make a diagnosis.