

What you should know about getting a . . . mammogram



Is there a test that can find breast cancer early?

Mammograms are the best tests for finding breast cancer early. Mammograms are a series of X-ray pictures of the breast that allow doctors to look for early signs of breast cancer, sometimes up to three years before it can be felt. When breast cancer is found early, treatment is most effective, and many women go on to live long and healthy lives.

When should I get a mammogram?

Most women should have their first mammogram at age 50 and then have another mammogram every two years until age 74. Talk to your health professional if you have any symptoms or changes in your breast, or if breast cancer runs in your family. He or she may recommend that you have mammograms before age 50 or more often than usual.

What happens if my mammogram is abnormal?

If your mammogram is abnormal or more tests are required, do not panic. Many women need additional tests, and most are not diagnosed with cancer. An abnormal mammogram does not always mean you have cancer. It does mean that you will need to have some additional X-rays or other tests before your doctor can be sure. Other tests may include an ultrasound (picture taken of the breast using sound waves) or a biopsy (removing tissue samples to be looked at closely under a microscope). You may be referred to a breast specialist or a surgeon, because these doctors are experts in diagnosing breast problems.

What should I expect during a mammogram?

The mammography machine is a special X-ray machine. One of your breasts will be placed on a plate. Another plate will press down on your breast from above. The plates will hold your breast still while the X-ray is being taken. These steps are repeated to get a view of the other breast. The plates are then turned to get side views of each breast.

Although getting a mammogram only takes a few minutes, you will feel some pressure while the plates are pressing on your breast. Most women find it uncomfortable, and a few find it painful. What you feel depends on the size of your breasts, how much your breasts need to be pressed to get a good view, the skill of the technologist, and where you are in your monthly menstrual cycle, if you are still having periods.

After getting your mammogram, the technologist will check to make sure your X-rays are of good quality. They cannot read the X-ray or tell you the results. A radiologist will read your mammogram. You may receive results immediately, or they will be sent to you and your doctor within a few weeks. If your mammogram is abnormal, you will likely hear from the facility earlier. If you do not receive your results within 30 days, you should contact your health care provider or the mammography facility.

Where can I find more information about breast cancer?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
1-800-CDC-INFO or www.cdc.gov/cancer

National Cancer Institute:
1-800-4-CANCER or www.cancer.gov

American Cancer Society:
1-800-ACS-2345 or www.cancer.org

People Living with Cancer/American Society of Clinical Oncology:
1-888-651-3038 or www.plwc.org

Where can I find a free or low-cost mammogram?

If you have a low income, or do not have insurance, and are between the ages of 40 and 64, you may be able to get a free or low-cost mammogram through the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program in your community. To learn more, call 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp.