

Mammography Q & A

What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is a specialized x-ray of the breast, designed to detect abnormalities in the breast suggestive of breast cancer, particularly those that are too early or too small to be felt on physical examination.

Why do I need a mammogram?

The estimated lifetime risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer is 13%, or approximately one in eight. As you get older, your risk increases; the chance of a woman in her sixties having breast cancer is nearly ten times that of a woman in her thirties. Mammograms help detect breast cancers early, when they are most easily treated and cured.

Why do I need a mammogram every year?

One of the most valuable tools in mammography is the ability to evaluate changes in the breast over time. Subtle changes can be detected when routine screening mammograms are obtained.

What about digital mammography?

Digital mammography offers a number of benefits. First, it is helpful in evaluating women with dense breasts, where before, the dense breast tissue could hide cancers. It is also helpful in providing comparison mammograms, as the images don't deteriorate over time as films do. The mammograms are also easily duplicated, and readily sent to another site for evaluation, should the patient move to a different location. Much of the detail in film mammograms is lost when they are copied, rendering them worthless for use as comparison studies; this is not the case with digital mammography.

When should I start having mammograms?

The typical recommendation is to begin screening mammography at age 40. In some patients, it is important to begin earlier, as their risk is higher. The chance of developing breast cancer increases if a woman's mother, sister, or daughter has been diagnosed with the disease, particularly if they were diagnosed before age 50. A close male blood relative with breast cancer also increases the risk.

Male blood relative?

Yes, men can also develop breast cancer. Though it is more rare than in women, it tends to be more aggressive, and the signs and symptoms are often overlooked. A new lump should be evaluated by your doctor, in order to make certain that it represents benign changes (gynecomastia) rather than a developing breast cancer.

What if I just had a normal mammogram, but notice a new lump?

It is important to remember that though mammography is a useful tool in detecting breast cancer, it is not perfect; up to 20% of breast cancers will not be detected on mammography, depending upon the type of breast cancer. That is why it is important to see your doctor if you detect changes in the breast, including a new lump, regardless of when the last mammogram was taken. This will help to ensure the earliest detection, and best chance for cure.

Dr. Randall Raziano is a radiologist on the Active Medical Staff at Montrose Memorial Hospital