YOUR HEALTH & WELL BEING

Mammography

Why Should I Have One?

A mammography is an x-ray test of the breasts that is used to help screen for or diagnose breast cancer. Cancer is most easily treated and cured when it is discovered in an early stage, and many small tumors can be seen on a mammogram before they can be felt by a woman or her doctor.

Although breast cancer can occur in men, 99 percent of all breast cancer is found in women. Factors that affect a woman's risk for breast cancer include:

- **Age.** The risk of breast cancer increases gradually as women age. All women age 40 and older are at risk for breast cancer. However, most breast cancers occur in women over age 50, and the risk is especially high for women over age 60.
- **Family medical history.** Having a mother or sister (or both) who had breast cancer increases a woman's risk of developing the disease.
- **Genetic alterations**. Changes in certain genes make women more susceptible to breast cancer.
- **Late childbearing.** Women who had their first child after the age of 30 have a greater chance of developing breast cancer than women who had their children at a younger age.
- **Radiation exposure.** Women whose breasts were exposed to significant amounts of radiation at a young age have an increased risk for developing breast cancer. However, the amount of radiation received from a diagnostic chest x-ray during childhood is not significant and does not increase the risk for developing breast cancer.
- **Previous breast biopsies.** Women who have had at least two breast biopsies done for non-cancerous (benign) breast disease are at increased risk for developing breast cancer.
- **Hormone replacement therapy.** The use of daily estrogen 0.625 mg plus progestin 2.5 mg for longer than four years slightly increases the risk of developing breast cancer.
- **Breast-feeding.** Recent studies have indicated that breast-feeding reduces the risk of breast cancer.

No one can predict who will develop breast cancer, and many women who develop breast cancer have no significant risk factors for the disease. That's why all organizations that produce guidelines about mammograms recommend regular mammograms every one to two years for women over the age of 40. Most of these organizations recommend yearly mammograms.

Yearly mammograms have been shown to prevent some deaths from breast cancer. If 10,000 women had mammograms every 18 months for 10 years, about four deaths would be prevented. Mammograms do not prevent breast cancer or reduce a woman's risk of developing cancer; however, they can reduce a woman's risk of dying from breast cancer by detecting it earlier than other types of breast cancer screenings.

Doctors also recommend that regular mammographies be combined with clinical breast examinations done by a health professional and self-breast examinations that you can do at home.

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