

The Fear of Mammograms By Dr. Rebecca White

Have you heard the joke about mammography? A woman once joked that to get ready for a mammogram all she had to do is shut her breast in the refrigerator door! Mammography is not a fun test for any women. Add the fear of possibly finding a breast cancer, and all the horror stories about mammograms, and there are a lot of women who wouldn't accept a mammogram to save their lives. Yet we know that breast cancer is one of the two top cancers affecting women. We also know that when breast cancer is detected early 90 out of 100 women will be cured with treatment. Women who have mammograms in their fifties live longer lives. So why are women scared of them? What are mammograms that they can scare women who are strong enough to care for themselves, friends and family?

A mammogram is a special type of x ray of the breasts, used to look for abnormal areas that could be cancer. Even though it uses a very small amount of radiation, mammograms can detect cancer because cancer is thicker than normal "stuff" (tissue, glands, fat) that makes up a normal breast. A mammogram is very good at finding cancer: it will find a cancer smaller than a pencil eraser, and up to two years earlier than it can be felt by an exam by your doctor.

Although it can sound scary, a mammogram actually is a pretty simple test. A full mammogram will take about 20 minutes to do and the x-ray part of the exam will only take 1 or 2 minutes. The difficult part of the test, besides having to be in a hospital cape or gown from the waist up, is that pressure needs to be placed on the breast in order to spread it out. This "flattening" of the breast allows a better picture to be taken with less radiation. Your breast will rest on the bottom shelf of the mammogram machine while a top clear plastic shelf will be pressed against your breast until you feel pressure. You are asked to hold still for the few seconds that the x-ray is actually done, and the shelf automatically releases its hold. Each breast is positioned in two different ways in order to get front and side views, so four films are usually taken. The technician then reviews the films to make sure your entire breast shows well and then you are done. Your health care provider should have reports back in 1-2 weeks.

Current recommendations for mammograms are related to age and risk factors. Women age 40 to 49 should get one every 1-2 year, depending on her risk factors for breast cancer. Women age 50 and more should have one yearly. Of course you and your health care provider will decide your actual mammogram schedule. And remember that men can get breast lumps and breast cancer too. And yes, they get mammograms when a lump is found.

As good as mammograms are, they are not perfect. This is why your health care professional will also examine your breasts from age 20 on to feel for lumps. Changes in your breasts that you should look for and report to your health care provider include:

- Any new lump that you find (and it doesn't matter if it hurts or not)
- Unusual thickening of your breasts

- Sticky or bloody discharge from your nipples
- Changes in the skin of your nipples or breasts such as puckering
- Unusual increase in the size of one breast, or one breast unusually lower than the other.

So just laugh at the joke about the mammogram feeling like a fridge door and go ahead and talk to your health care provider about how to schedule one. The traveling mammogram machine comes out once a year, and mammograms can be done in Anchorage as well as most US cities. There are also ways to get mammograms for women who do not have health insurance. Don't let all the rumors scare you to death.