

Mammograms and Breast Cancer

By: Clare Lattimore, FNP

The Breast Cancer Detection Center of Alaska will be offering screening mammograms in Unalaska this summer. Breast cancer is one of the most common causes of serious illness and death for women. Finding the problem early may save your life, so if you are a woman over the age of 40, think about scheduling yourself for this simple test.

A mammogram is a specialized x-ray picture of breast tissue, and it is one of the best tools available for discovering small tumors. Mammograms, however, are only one piece of the diagnostic puzzle, and women should be aware of other ways to monitor their health.

Starting in her late teens or early twenties, a woman should learn to examine her own breasts to check for lumps, discharge, or swollen glands. She should also see a health care provider about once a year for a women's health check-up that includes a clinical breast exam by a professional provider.

Once a woman reaches forty, the American Cancer Society recommends having a screening mammogram every year. Women should still be checking their own breasts once a month, and seeing a health care provider once a year for a clinical breast exam. Sometimes this physical exam finds something that makes it necessary to do a special study called a diagnostic mammogram, and in that case, the screening mammogram is not helpful. For that reason, it is advisable to have the physical check-up before scheduling a routine screening mammogram.

There are other diagnostic tools used for evaluating breast masses. These include ultrasound, MRI, and surgical procedures such as biopsy or needle aspiration. These steps are taken when the physical exam and the mammogram point to a possible problem.

Prior to age forty, mammograms are not recommended, because they are not very accurate. This is because of the nature of the tissue being x-rayed, which changes with age. When a woman under forty has a breast abnormality, they most often need an ultrasound or MRI to visualize it clearly. Screening mammograms cannot be counted on to diagnose the problem.

Mammograms do not prevent cancer. In fact, they require a small dose of radiation, and should not be used unnecessarily. There is no sure way to prevent cancer, but research scientists have identified some risk factors. Obesity, alcohol consumption, and high fat diets have all been linked to breast cancer. Long term hormone therapy, excessive use of antibiotics, and exposure to pesticides, plastics and certain other chemicals may also increase your chances of developing cancer. In general, a healthy lifestyle with plenty of exercise, a balanced diet, and avoidance of unnecessary chemicals is your best bet. Early detection of tumors is the key to survival.