

Frequently Asked Questions on Breast Cancer Screening

1. How good are mammograms?

A mammogram is able to find about 85 percent of breast cancers. A physical exam can only find about 60 percent and the two together can find about 95 percent. This is the reason we do mammograms every year. It is important to watch for a change in the breast from one year to another.

2. How much radiation do I get with a mammogram?

The radiation from a mammogram is now very low. The earlier mammograms were higher, but the amount of radiation from a mammogram is far less than that of an x-ray and about the same as taking a flight across country in a jet.

3. Why don't we use ultrasound or MRI?

Mammograms remain the "gold standard" for finding breast cancers. Ultrasounds are good for telling whether or not a lump is a cyst or a solid mass, and an MRI gives a lot of information as well. However, it is far too expensive to do these tests every year on every woman over 40 years old in the country.

4. Breast cancer doesn't run in my family, so why should I bother with mammograms?

About 10 percent to 15 percent of breast cancers run in the family. About 80 percent of women who get breast cancer have no risk factors other than simply being women. Therefore, all women should have mammograms every year after age 40.

5. I have fibrocystic disease and I am always lumpy. It hurts when I get a mammogram, so I would rather not.

In fibrocystic disease a woman's breast has a lot of harmless lumps, and a mammogram is our best tool to tell a good lump from a bad lump. For someone who has a physical exam in which the doctor found lumps that were hard to interpret, it is even more important to get a mammogram.

6. I have heard that cancers are there for years before they are big enough to be noticed, so why should I bother getting a mammogram?

Most often breast cancers take many years to develop. When they are only one or two cells, we cannot find them. They have to grow large enough to be seen on a mammogram. However, if we can find the cancers before they are big enough to be felt, they are easier to cure and often the woman does not have to lose her breast to cure the cancer. If a cancer can be found early enough -- before it is a 1/3 inch in size or spreads to a lymph node -- then a woman may not have to have chemotherapy either.

7. I've heard that mammograms hurt. Is there anything I can do to make my mammogram less painful?

The pressure created by the mammogram machine is needed to get a clear image of the breast. This pressure only lasts for a few seconds. To reduce discomfort, try to get your mammogram the week after your menstrual period. This is the time when your breasts will be the least tender.