Mammogram: Testing for Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women. Every woman is at some risk for breast cancer, but there are many factors that can make one woman’s risk differ from others.

Risk factors for breast cancer include:
• Growing older
• Personal history of breast cancer
• Breast cancer in family (especially mother, daughter or sister)
• Abnormal breast exams or mammograms in the past
• No children, or having children at a late age
• Eating a diet high in fat or being overweight
• Prolonged exposure to estrogen (early onset of period, late menopause, long-term birth control, estrogen therapy)

What is a mammogram?
A mammogram is an X-ray picture of the inside of the breast. It can be done as a routine screening test or to help pinpoint the cause of symptoms (nipple discharge, lump, skin changes).

Why should I have a mammogram?
Mammography is currently the best screening tool we have for breast cancer. A mammogram can find cancer at a very early stage – long before a lump would be felt during an exam by you or your doctor. When cancer is found very early, the chance for a cure is much better.

Are there risks in taking this test? There are no known significant risks from mammograms when guidelines are followed. The dose of radiation is low and the test will not damage breast tissue.

How do I prepare for a mammogram?
You will need to undress from the waist up, so it will be easier if you wear a two-piece outfit and a shirt you can remove easily. Before your test, please do not put deodorant, powders or perfume under your arms or in the chest area. Ingredients in these products can show up on the mammogram and look like abnormal areas.

What should I expect during the test?
A mammogram can be done in a doctor’s office, hospital or clinic. It should be done by qualified people who are certified to perform the test and read the results. During the test, each breast is compressed between two plates and an X-ray picture is taken. Two views are taken – top to bottom and side to side. You’ll feel pressure, and your breasts may ache for a short time.

The compression is done to get the best pictures with the least amount of radiation. It can hurt for a short time, but it allows the best chance for finding a problem. Tell the technologist if you have breast implants as special pictures may be needed.

What about the results?
The results will be interpreted by a radiologist and sent to your doctor. Ask your health care provider how and when you will get your test results.

What if my results are not normal?
About 1 in 10 women who have a mammogram will need to get more pictures taken. Most do not have cancer so don’t be alarmed if this happens to you. Your doctor or nurse will call and discuss your results with you. An abnormal mammogram does not always mean you have cancer.

When you turn 40, talk with your provider about when to start mammograms. You should begin getting a mammogram every year no later than age 45. At age 55, you may choose to get a mammogram every other year. Discuss with your provider as to when to stop having mammograms. You may begin mammograms earlier, or have them more often, based on your risk factors, preferences, and provider’s recommendations.