

“What’s it like to get a mammogram? Does it hurt? Is it embarrassing?”

When you get a mammogram, you stand beside the machine, and a specially trained technologist helps place your breast on a plastic plate. A second piece of plastic is placed on top and for a few seconds, some pressure is applied to flatten the breast and get a good, clear picture. Two pictures usually are taken of each breast. Some women may feel a little discomfort, but most report none. The entire mammography exam takes about 15 minutes.

It’s a good idea to wear a blouse with a skirt or slacks, rather than a dress, since you will have to undress above the waist. You probably will be given a short gown to wear during the exam.

A specialist, called a radiologist, will read the mammogram to see if any suspicious areas exist.

“What happens if they find something?”

If a mass is found, the doctor may use a thin needle to remove fluid or a small amount of tissue. This may show whether it’s a fluid-filled cyst, which is not cancer, or a solid mass, which may or may not be cancer.

Sometimes the doctor will do a biopsy, which is a minor operation to take out part or all of the suspicious tissue. It is then examined under a microscope by a specialist called a pathologist. A biopsy is the only sure way to know if cancer is present. It’s important to remember that even if you are told you need a biopsy, more than 80% of lumps or suspicious areas are not cancer.

If the biopsy shows that there is cancer, the woman and her doctor will discuss treatment options. Early cancer often can be treated by removing the lump or a portion of the breast rather than the whole breast.

“What if I find something that worries me?”

If you find a lump, see any ‘dimpling’ or puckering of the skin or notice anything that you know is unusual for you, see your doctor right away. It probably isn’t cancer, but do yourself a favor and have it checked out.



Some important reasons to get a mammogram

- Finding breast cancer early can save your life.
- As you get older, your risk for breast cancer increases. Three-fourths of all breast cancers occur in women over 50.
- Most women diagnosed with breast cancer have no history of it in their family.
- Early detection often means less surgery.
- Getting a mammogram is easier than you think.
- Having a mammogram once a year helps give you peace of mind.

American Cancer Society guidelines for the early detection of breast cancer

If you are age 40 or over:

- Clinical breast exam every year
- Breast self-exam every month
- Mammogram every year

If you are age 20 to 39:

- Clinical breast exam every three years
- Breast self-exam every month

If you have a history of breast cancer in your family, discuss mammography screening guidelines and scheduling with your health care provider.

For answers to your questions about breast cancer, call toll free 1-800-ACS-2345 or on the Internet www.cancer.org.