Breast cancer is the second leading cause of death for women in the United States. Women have a 1 in 8 chance of being diagnosed with breast cancer within their lifetime (American Cancer Society, 2011). Fortunately these numbers are going down due to early detection and treatment. So how do you detect breast cancer early? MAMMOGRAMS!

Who should get a mammogram?

The American Cancer Society, Society for Breast Imaging, and the American College of Radiology, recommend that women with an average risk receive yearly mammograms starting at age 40 (Radiological Society of North America, 2010). This recommendation is for all women; even those who are symptom free and includes those who do not have a family history of breast cancer. The recommendation came after studies showed that three fourths of women diagnosed with breast cancer did not have a family history, and were not considered high risk. Additionally, studies show that 1 in 6 breast cancers occur in women aged 40-49 (American Cancer Society, 2011).

Mammograms are recommended earlier for women with an increase risk of breast cancer. It is recommended that these women have yearly mammograms starting by age 30 or 10 years earlier than the age of diagnosis of the youngest affected relative for women with a lifetime risk greater than 20% or who have mothers or sisters with pre-menopausal breast cancer (Society of Breast Imaging, 2010). The Breast Cancer Risk Assessment Tool can be used to estimate a women’s risk of developing invasive breast cancer. This tool can be accessed at http://www.cancer.gov/bcrisktool/.

Women 40 years or older who are breastfeeding or have implants should also have yearly mammograms. Breastfeeding may cause breast to look denser and implants may required more views to determine if there are abnormal areas noted.

What is a mammogram?

Since 1969 mammography has been used as a screening tool to detect and diagnosis breast cancer. A mammogram uses very low levels of radiation to produce x-rays that examine each breast. These x-rays produce pictures of the breast tissue, from different angles. Radiologists use this tool to localize abnormal areas.

Why should you have a mammogram?

Mammograms can show abnormal areas up to two years sooner than lumps can be felt. This leads to early treatment, less suffering, and increase the chances of survival (American Cancer Society, 2011).
Society, 2011). Early detection can also prevent the need for extensive treatment for advanced cancers, and improve chances of breast conservation (American College of Radiology, 2010).

How is a mammogram performed?

Mammogram machines have special platforms where the breasts are placed. The breasts are then slowly compressed with a Plexiglas, or a plastic paddle. X-rays are then taken of a top-to-bottom view, and then an angled side view. This process is repeated for both breasts. In order to reduce the possibility of a blurred image, it is important to hold very still, and you may even be asked to hold your breath for a few seconds. Most mammogram screen procedures will take around 20 to 30 minutes (American Cancer Society, 2011).

Mammogram Tips:

- It is important to have previous mammograms available for the radiologist to compare to the present images. Try to have mammograms done at the same place each year or have your records sent to where you will be having your current mammogram.
- The best time to schedule a mammogram is the week following your menstrual cycle. To reduce discomfort from the exam, avoid scheduling your exam when your breasts are tender or swollen.
- Avoid the use of deodorant, antiperspirant, talcum powder, or lotion under your arms on the day of the exam. These substances can cause areas to look like calcium spots.
- Before leaving be sure to ask when your results will be available. If you have not received results within that time, be sure to follow-up with the doctor or the facility.
- Always inform your doctor, the facility, or x-ray technician if you are pregnant, or there is a possibility you may be.

Limitations:

While mammograms are useful in early detection and diagnosis they do have limitations. Mammograms do not find all cancers and may not find all cancers early enough to cure (American College of Radiology, 2010).
References


