

FACT SHEET

BREAST CANCER: QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ABOUT MAMMOGRAPHY

The Importance of Early Detection

Breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in women in America. When breast cancer is detected early and treated promptly, suffering and ultimately the loss of life can be significantly reduced. Women are encouraged to ask their doctors and other health care providers about mammography screening. Mammography (an “x-ray” picture of the breast) is the single most effective method to detect breast changes that may be cancer, long before physical symptoms can be seen or felt. For early stage breast cancer, there are more treatment options, treatment can be less disfiguring and less toxic, and survival is improved.

As women age, their risk of breast cancer increases. *For most women, high-quality mammography screening should begin at the age of 40.* As risk factors vary in everyone, each woman and her doctor should discuss the plan that’s right for her. Most organizations recommend screening every one to two years; some recommend it take place every year. Screening should continue throughout a woman’s lifetime.

In addition to the use of mammography, health care providers should also examine a woman’s breasts, called clinical breast examination (CBE) as part of routine health care to search for any abnormalities that may be missed by mammography. Breast self-examination (BSE) may alert women to any changes in her breasts, but it is not a substitute for mammography screening. The value of BSE is that it helps a woman become familiar with how her breasts normally feel and to notice any changes.

Is mammography reliable?

In 1992, the U.S. Congress passed the Mammography Quality Standards Act to ensure that mammography performed at more than 10,000 facilities throughout the country is of high quality and reliable. To lawfully perform mammography, each facility must prominently display a certificate issued by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This certificate serves as evidence that the facility meets quality standards. You can order the U.S. Agency for Health Care Research and Quality’s booklet *Things to Know About Quality Mammograms* at no charge, in English or Spanish, by calling (800) 358-9295. Information for health care professionals is also available.

What should women expect when they have a mammogram?

A woman who still menstruates should schedule the mammogram for one week after her menstrual period begins, when the breasts will be the least tender. Women are asked to avoid using deodorant ant lotions on the day of the mammogram and should wear two-piece clothing to make undressing more convenient. A specially trained radiologic technologist will perform the mammogram. The woman will be asked to undress from the waist up only, and stand next to the x-ray machine. Two flat surfaces will compress one breast first, then the other for a few seconds. Compression is necessary to produce the best pictures using the lowest amount of radiation possible.

Is mammography the only way to detect breast cancer?

Mammography screening remains the best available method to detect breast cancer early. However, no medical test is always 100 percent accurate, and mammography is no exception. Research is under way to improve the technology to lead to better accuracy and to create new technologies.

Will health insurance pay for screening mammograms?*

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that all but 2 states (Utah and Wyoming) require that health insurance policies offer mammography screening reimbursement.

**Regular screening mammograms are covered by the U.S. government’s Medicare and Medicaid program and other private health insurance plans (women should check their own insurance plans for individual details). Free or low-cost mammograms are available for women without health insurance in many locations. For a program near you, contact the CDC at (888) 842-6355.*

Will Medicare pay for screening mammograms?

Yes. Medicare covers mammography screening every year for women age 40 and older. Yet, eligible women and their doctors may not know about this important benefit. To raise awareness of this service, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) launched a national media campaign in 1998. A series of publications are available in English and Spanish. For more information on Medicare coverage, contact the Medicare toll-free hotline at (800) MEDICARE or the Medicare website, www.medicare.gov.

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How can women get low-cost or free mammograms?

Throughout October, National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and especially on National Mammography Day, the third Friday in October, many mammography facilities offer special programs, including extended hours. Many facilities are also willing to offer services at a lower fee or will establish a payment schedule. For the names of FDA-accredited local mammography facilities, call the NCI's Cancer Information Service at (800) 4-CANCER. The CDC's Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP) also provides screening for medically underserved women. For program contacts, call the CDC at (888) 842-6355 or visit CDC's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/contacts.htm>. In addition, the YWCA's ENCORE^{plus} program provides low-cost or free services throughout the United States - call (800)95EPLUS or your local YWCA.

What barriers keep women from getting mammograms on a routine basis?*

Studies have identified a number of barriers to mammography screening. Some can be overcome with health education; others require programs to make mammography more accessible for women. The top four barriers, in women's words are:

"I don't need a mammogram because my doctor has never recommended I have one."

"I've never thought about it."

"I have no breast problems, so mammography isn't necessary."

"I don't have enough time."

Other barriers include:

- Fear about pain from the procedure.
- Fear of a diagnosis of breast cancer.
- Concerns about screening costs.
- Concerns about the financial burden of diagnostic procedures and treatment if needed.
- No recent clinical breast examination or Pap test.
- No routine source of health care.
- Difficulty taking time off from work to be screened.
- Living a far distance from the screening site.

** Source: The Manual of Intervention Strategies to Increase Mammography Rates, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention with the Prudential Center for Health Care Research.*



NBCAM
NATIONAL BREAST CANCER
AWARENESS MONTH

For more information about mammography and breast cancer or to learn when and where you can obtain a low-cost mammogram or other services, please call any of the following toll-free numbers, or log on to our website at www.nbcam.org.

American Cancer Society
(800) ACS-2345

Cancer Care, Inc.
(800) 813-HOPE

Cancer Research and Prevention Foundation
(800) 227-2732

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's
National Breast & Cervical Cancer
Early Detection Program
(888) 842-6355

National Alliance of Breast Cancer
Organizations (NABCO)
(888) 80-NABCO

National Cancer Institute's
Cancer Information Service
(800) 4-CANCER

National Cancer Institute's
Cancer Information Service-TTY
(800) 332-8615

Y-ME National Breast Cancer
Organization
(800) 221-2141

Y-ME Spanish Language Hotline
(800) 986-9505