

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in the United States. If it is found early, it is much more easily and successfully treated. A screening mammogram can help with this early detection. The information that follows is to help you decide whether you want to have breast cancer screenings.

Who Is at Risk?

Women 50 or older are at higher risk than younger women, and women whose mother or sister has had breast cancer are at an even higher risk. The older you are, the more likely you are to have a breast cancer.

What Is a Mammogram?



A mammogram is a special x-ray of the breast used to help detect cancer. Although sometimes uncomfortable, it is not painful or difficult. The radiation is not harmful.

The mammogram is the most reliable screening method available today, and all experts agree that women between the ages of 50 and 70 should have this screening test performed every 1 to 2 years. This frequency increases the chance of finding breast cancer at an earlier stage.

However, mammograms are not always accurate. A mammogram may fail to find a real breast cancer (a “false negative”). A mammogram is often positive when a cancer is not actually there (a “false positive”), which can result in unnecessary biopsies and anxiety. For every cancer detected, there are about 10 false positive mammograms and unnecessary biopsies.

All experts agree that mammograms save lives of women between 50 and 70. Because experts do not agree on exactly which women older than 70 should get mammograms, after reaching 70, each woman needs to help decide whether she wants to be screened for breast cancer.

Should I Have a Mammogram?



The mammogram itself is not a difficult test, and the screening is useful if it detects cancer that will cause you problems as you grow older. Your decision to have a mammogram, therefore, depends upon your health, your life expectancy, and your willingness to take action if the mammogram results are positive.

The controversy about mammograms in late life is due to the slower growth of breast cancer in the older woman, and the higher chance of dying of some other cause with each extra year. As age increases, so does the chance that a mammogram will find a cancer that would not do you harm before your natural death.

What Happens If the Mammogram Is Positive?

If the mammogram is positive, your doctor will recommend a biopsy. If cancer is found, you will probably need some surgery. Breast cancer surgeries are smaller, simpler operations now than in prior decades. Hormone treatment and chemotherapy are also recommended for some women with breast cancer.

How Do I Make a Decision?

In general, if you are healthy, you should consider having a mammogram screening until you are at least age 85. At this age, women can still expect to live 6 more years, and many healthy women will live another 10 years. A healthy 90-year old can expect to live 4 or 5 more years.

On the other hand, if you have a serious, life-threatening disease or the risks of surgery are high, you may not want to go through the tests, biopsies, and surgery needed to find and treat cancer if it is found. If the mammogram result were positive, it would just raise your anxiety and make it more difficult to cope with your existing medical conditions.

How Do I Make A Decision? Continued

Your doctor can answer questions about your health and the risk of breast cancer treatment in you. Only you know how many medical tests, biopsies, and treatments you are willing to accept to improve your chances of surviving breast cancer. Making the choice that fits your feelings and health is important.

Learn as much as you need to decide, and talk to your doctor about your decision. If you want the doctor to decide, remember that making a good choice doesn't guarantee that it will come out right.

Resources

Organization

American Cancer Society

Phone: (800) ACS-2345 (227-2345)

TTY: (866) 228-4327

Web site: www.cancer.org

Cancer Information Specialists are available 24 hours a day to answer your questions in English or Spanish.

National Cancer Institute —

The Cancer Information Service (CIS)

Phone: (800) 4-CANCER (422-6237)

TTY: (800) 332-8615

Web site: www.cancer.gov

Live web chat line: www.cancer.gov/help

Up-to-date information about cancer. Specialists answer questions in English or Spanish.

Web Site

www.medlineplus.gov

Up-to-date, quality health care information. Go to Health Topics, "Breast Cancer" and "Male Breast Cancer."