

What is a mammogram?

A mammogram is an x-ray examination of the breasts, used to detect and diagnose breast diseases. Screening mammography is used as a preventive measure for women who have no symptoms of breast disease.

A screening mammogram usually involves two views of each breast. Diagnostic mammography involves additional views of the breast, and is used when an abnormality is found during screening, or in women who have breast complaints, such as a breast mass, nipple discharge, breast pain, or skin irritation.

Mammography is a very safe procedure that uses low doses of radiation to produce high quality x-rays.

Are there different kinds of mammograms?

Two kinds of mammograms are available:

- Screen-film mammography
- Digital mammography

In screen-film mammography, the breast image is captured on x-ray film. The film is then developed, and a physician who specializes in the interpretation of x-rays and other types of diagnostic imaging studies, reviews the films on a high-intensity light box.

In digital mammography, the breast image is captured on specially designed digital detectors. The digital detector converts x-rays into an electrical signal, which is then sent to a computer. The radiologist can review the digital mammogram on a high-resolution computer monitor.

Who should have a mammogram?

The American Cancer Society recommends that all women have a baseline screening mammogram between the age of 35 and 40 and that beginning at the age of 40, women have an annual screening mammogram.

In addition to annual screening for women 40 and older, women with certain risk factors should discuss an appropriate screening program with their physician.

What are the risk factors for breast cancer?

Some of the known risk factors for breast cancer include:

- family or personal history of breast cancer
- early menstrual onset/late onset menopause
- use of oral contraceptives
- use of hormone replacement therapy
- alcohol use (2 or more drinks/day)

How should I prepare for a mammogram?

- If you have had mammograms in different facilities, call those facilities in advance and arrange to have your previous mammograms, reports and any other treatment reports forwarded.
- Do not wear deodorant, powder or cream under your arms as it may interfere with the quality of your mammogram.