



Save your life

What is mammography? And why is everyone talking about it?

Mammography is a special type of x ray which is used to examine the breasts. It's done on a special x ray machine, which is different from the routine x ray machine that you would have a chest x ray or a spine x ray. It is used in early detection and diagnosis of breast diseases and breast cancer in women. Yes, mostly women, because even men can get breast cancer and they also sometimes need a mammogram!

What is cancer and what is breast cancer?

Cancer is a disease where the cells of the body start multiplying in an uncontrolled manner and don't stop when they have to. This gives rise to a lump, which can increase over a time and spread to other organs and can cause death too.

Why have a mammogram?

Mammogram is considered the "Gold Standard" in early detection of breast cancer. It sees things up to two years before the patient may feel a lump, or a doctor can palpate a lump. And when it is found at this stage, then it is treated very well. In an

early case, only the lump may be removed, the entire breast need not be removed. So early treatment and mammograms can save your breast, and your life. As a women ages, the chances of her getting breast cancer increases. So a mammogram is like having an annual executive medical check-up. The American College of Radiology recommends "Women age 40 and older should have a screening mammogram every year and should continue to do so for as long as they are in good health."

Like we do check-ups for cholesterol, triglycerides and sugar, in the blood, as a routine check-up, we ought to start doing mammograms. People say, it is painful, it hurts. Not really. The new paddles that we use now, are so much better and it's pretty comfortable, especially when done in the post menstrual phase.

What about the radiation issue?

Mammograms have a very small amount of radiation. So there's no problem in doing it every year once you are 40. Further, we also give you lead protection for your abdomen and thyroid. But if there is a chance that you may be pregnant, avoid it! If you are under 40 years of age, and have a family history of breast cancer, then we can do a mammogram. Otherwise, for under 40s, we do a sonography only.

A woman who has a female relative like mother, sister or aunt who has had a breast cancer is at a higher incidence of getting breast cancer. There is a genetic predilection and some genes such as BRCA 1 and BRCA 2 genes have a known association with breast cancer. However, 85% of cancer patients don't have a family history, so everyone needs to be checked. When the mammogram is done, it needs to be interpreted by a radiologist who is specially trained to report mammograms. Sometimes there may be a mention of "Microcalcifications" in your report. Microcalcifications are of different types. The "bad" types are the ones which are suggestive of early breast cancer. These are very tiny and are less than a mm in size. But not all are bad. Some may not be cancer and that's what your mammogram and your radiologist will help you to know.

Breast self-examination is a very good method of keeping a watch for yourself. Taught by a trained nurse or your doctor, it's a good idea to examine your breasts for any lumps or changes every few months. And what are the things you need to be careful about? A breast lump, swelling in the breast, skin irritation or dimpling, nipple pain or nipple turning inwards, redness, thickening or scaling of nipple skin, nipple discharge other than milk, swelling in the axilla. Not all breast lumps are cancer. There can be some benign lumps like fibroadenomas, cysts, etc., which are felt by a patient but are not cancer. You may need a sonography after a mammogram. There are many findings in the breast – for example cysts – which need to be checked by a sonography even if a mammogram is done. It's very important.



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