

Information for Consumers

Frequently Asked Questions About Digital Mammography

What is digital mammography? Is it different from screen film mammography?

Conventional screen film mammography uses low energy x-rays that pass through a compressed breast during a mammographic examination. The exiting x-rays are absorbed by x-ray film, which is then developed into a mammographic image that can be held and looked at by the radiologist. This traditional process is similar to personal photographic cameras and photographic film where light is focused on the film and developed to produce a negative, which can be printed as a picture.

With digital mammography, low energy x-rays pass through the breast exactly like conventional mammograms but are recorded by means of an electronic digital detector instead of the film. This electronic image can be displayed on a video monitor like a TV or printed onto film. Again, this is similar to digital cameras that produce a digital picture that can be displayed on a computer screen or printed on paper. The radiologist can manipulate the digital mammogram electronically to magnify an area, change contrast, or change the brightness.

Is the mammogram procedure any different?

No. Women will not notice any difference. In digital mammography, the breast tissue is still compressed the same way as screen film mammography. The technologist can review the image and check to determine whether the image or picture is good on the computer screen. There may be a shorter wait time after the image is taken because there is no film to develop.

Is digital mammography “better” than screen film mammography?

It is often assumed that a “newer” product is an improved or better product. That is not always the case. Screen film mammography has been used for years as part of breast cancer screening for all women.

Several studies have been done on digital mammography and screen film mammography. One major study, the Digital Mammographic Imaging Screening Trial, has shown that there may be benefit in using digital mammography instead of screen film mammography for some women under age 50 and for women who have dense breasts but no other abnormal breast symptoms, such as a lump or discharge. More studies are needed to further evaluate the two types of mammograms.

The important message here is that mammograms have been shown to save lives by detecting breast cancer early when it is the most treatable. Women over age 40 who participate in regular breast cancer screening gain the most benefit.

Is there a difference in cost between digital mammograms compared to screen film mammograms?

Digital mammograms are more expensive than screen film mammograms. Because of this, it is important for women to check with their health insurer to see if they will pay for the digital mammogram. However, in women over 50 years of age, the results of the Digital Mammographic Imaging Screening Trial demonstrated no benefit in using digital mammography over screen film mammography.

Important Points for Women to Consider:

- Studies have shown that mammography saves lives. **It is important for women to be screened no matter what type of mammogram they receive.**
- All women age 40 and older should receive a mammogram as part of their annual breast cancer screening along with a clinical breast exam.
- **Women should not delay getting a screen film mammogram for a digital mammogram.**
- **Women should NOT have a digital mammogram if they have just recently had a screen film mammogram.**

An important point to keep in mind is that breast density may change over time. A radiologist evaluates the density of a woman's breast during the interpretation of the mammogram. A description of breast density is usually included in the mammogram report sent to your provider.