

Mammography

All women in the UK aged between 50 and 70 are invited to have a routine mammography (breast x-ray examination) every three years.

What is mammography?

Mammography is a special x-ray of the breast. It can detect most breast cancers at an early stage, before symptoms develop. All women aged 50-70 years in the UK are offered a routine mammography every 3 years. Routine mammography is not available to women under 50 unless you have a first degree relative (mother or sister) who has had breast cancer at a young age. Your GP can advise on this.

Why is mammography important?

Mammography saves lives. About 1 in 12 women develop breast cancer at some stage in life, mostly over the age of 50. The earlier breast cancer is detected, the better the chance of a cure. Research studies have shown that mammography screening has significantly reduced the number of deaths from breast cancer in the UK.

What if there is an abnormality?

Most women have a normal mammogram. Some women are asked to attend again if the x-ray picture is not clear, or to look more closely at a special area of the breast which needs a further detailed check. Many women who are recalled do not have cancer and the second check clarifies this. A small number are found to have early breast cancer and are offered referral to a breast clinic for treatment.

How is mammography done?

There are many breast screening units throughout the UK. Many of the units are mobile and move from area to area. Appointments are sent out to women in each area in rotation. When you attend the unit you will be asked to undress down to the waist. (Therefore it is best to wear a skirt or trousers and a top.) A radiographer will help to position each breast between two special x-ray plates. The whole visit does not take long. As an appointment system operates, waiting times at the units are usually short. Results of screening are sent you and your GP.

The administration of breast screening is a large exercise. Problems such as if you move to a different area, or change your surname can sometimes lead to errors. Tell your GP if you did not receive the results of your mammogram, or if you have not been invited to attend in the last three years and you are aged 50-70.

Breast awareness

Most breast cancers are detected early by mammography. However a small number are not. See you GP if you notice any changes, lumps, or other abnormalities in a breast.

Further information

NHS Breast Screening Programme - www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breastscreen/

© EMIS and PIP 2006 Updated: February 2006

Comprehensive patient resources are available at www.patient.co.uk