

What's new: In breast cancer screening technology

Alice Crann Good , BellaMagazine.com 4:20 p.m. CDT September 23, 2014



(Photo: Photo Special to Bella)

The American Cancer Society reports that research into the causes, prevention, screening/diagnosing and treatment of breast cancer is ongoing at many medical centers worldwide.

What's great for us is some of the most sophisticated imaging methods are being used right here in Pensacola.

"Realistically, we have fantastic health resources and centers here. All have the capability of excellence in mammography, and all modalities are available here," says Dr. John Ervin, associate professor with Florida State University/College of Medicine/Obstetrics & Gynecology Residency Program/Sacred Heart

Health System.

"Because of new technology, we have been able to have earlier and earlier detection," says Ervin, who is also a volunteer with the Panhandle American Cancer Society. "So, less invasive surgery has been necessary.

"Go back 20 years ago, and the average mass was three to four centimeters, a big mass that required big surgery. The trend is we are finding breast cancer earlier, which means less invasive surgeries. Less invasive is a good thing."

PENSACOLA AT THE FOREFRONT

Baptist Health Care is using one of the newest technologies — digital breast tomosynthesis or 3-D digital mammography.

This technology takes advantage of all the benefits of digital mammography to create unparalleled high-quality images, producing more precise and detailed images from various angles. These images can be reconstructed to create a 3-D view of the breast, allowing doctors to examine the inner architecture of the breast without distortion, which can lead to earlier detection of abnormalities when breast cancer is most treatable.

Benefits of 3-D digital mammography include: Improved accuracy and detection; clearer images that show structures in the breast and their spatial relationship with the surrounding breast tissue; the ability to detect breast cancer very early; tomosynthesis scans can be performed quickly; confidence to rule out cancer without recalling the patient for further study.

"One of the persistent criticisms of mammography is the anxiety felt by women who are called back from a screening for additional views," says Dr. Vashti Hellein, a member of Radiology Associates-Pensacola and an independent member of the medical staff at Baptist Hospital.

"With 3-D mammography, multiple studies demonstrate an increased cancer detection rate combined with a decreased patient recall rate," Hellein says. "We are fortunate to have this exceptional technology available to the community at multiple Baptist Health Care facilities."

Further study is ongoing to delineate which patients will benefit from the 3-D technology — i.e., young women, women with dense breasts, women with a strong family history of breast cancer or any women needing a screening, Hellein says.

"The most important message about mammography is that screening for breast cancer saves lives. Period," Hellein says. "We are fortunate in this country to have it widely available and are extremely fortunate to have it in our community."

EXPLORING ALL OPTIONS

Dr. Donald Farmer, medical director of the Ann L. Baroco Center for Breast Health at Sacred Heart Women's Hospital, says, "Basically, we are all trying to cover every base we can to detect breast cancer, and because of today's technology, our ability to cure breast cancer is so much greater."

With that goal ultimately in mind, Farmer says the Baroco Center is using a leading breast cancer screening — the automated breast ultrasound system (ABUS). ABUS is a new approach to finding up to 30 percent more cancers in women who have dense breast tissue.

Women with extremely dense breast tissue have a four to six times greater risk of developing breast cancer than women who do not have dense breast tissue, Farmer says. While mammography remains the gold standard for early detection, finding cancers in women with dense breast tissue can be limited with mammography alone.

Unlike mammography, which uses radiation, ABUS uses sound waves to create 3-D pictures of the breast tissue.

"It provides us a reproducible technique," Farmer says. Radiologists can look through hundreds of breast tissue image "slices," looking at layers of dense tissue to find breast cancers that may have been missed on a mammogram.

The Benefits of ABUS include: no radiation; clearer images of breast tissue; scanning process lasts less than 60 seconds; screening takes less than 15 minutes, providing your doctor with state-of-the art 3-D ultrasound images regardless of breast density.

For many years, mammograms that recorded images of the breast on film were the only option. Now, digital mammograms are readily available. Digital mammograms store and analyze information using a computer.

All health care systems in Pensacola — including Baptist, Sacred Heart, Santa Rosa Medical Center, West Florida Hospital and Woodlands Medical Specialists — use digital mammography to find cancer in its early stages, says Dr. Joanne Bujnoski, Panhandle American Cancer Society Volunteer Leadership Council chair.

"Women should avail themselves to all of this great technology," says Bujnoski, a retired radiation oncologist who treated breast cancer for more than 30 years.

"We are fortunate," Ervin adds. "We are not in a small, rural community with limited access and antiquated systems. Our challenge, though, is to increase our screening rate for eligible women — especially women in medically underserved communities."

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