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Understanding Breast Cancer Screening

What is Breast Cancer screening?

Breast screening is a method of identifying breast cancer at an early stage. It is done by performing x-rays of the breast known as mammograms. A mammogram can detect small changes in breast tissue, which may indicate cancers which are too small to be felt either by the woman herself or by a doctor. By the time a lump can be felt, it is likely to have been there for quite some time, and the longer it has been there undetected, the more the chance it has had to grow and spread.

What is a Mammogram?

It is a simple low dose x-ray of the breast which is performed by exposing the breast to a low dose of radiation. During the procedure, the breasts are compressed between two plates for a few seconds. This is not painful but some women may find it slightly uncomfortable. The mammogram is reported by a specialist breast radiologist.

Would you need more tests after a Mammogram?

If the mammogram is reported as normal, you need not go for any further tests. However, additional tests will be required if the radiologist detects an abnormality. These include a breast ultrasound and in a few cases, a breast MRI. A needle biopsy of the lump may be recommended and this can be done as an outpatient procedure.

What are the advantages of screening?

Apart from saving vital time, which is crucial in fighting cancer, screening also gives the patient the following advantages:

- It detects cancers at a stage when treatment is most likely to be successful
- As the cancer is detected when it is very small, the chances of breast conservation surgery increases. This allows the patient to save her breast
- It saves lives by reducing the risk of dying from breast cancer

What are the disadvantages of screening?

Though the advantages of screening outweighs the disadvantages, you should still be aware of them:

- Mammograms sometimes need to be repeated for better assessment of an abnormality seen in the initial mammogram
- It may raise a false alarm by showing an abnormality which on further tests might not prove to be a cancer and thus cause patient anxiety
- Breast screening occasionally misses a cancer

Remember, breast screening cannot prevent cancer. It only detects cancer.



How frequently do you need to be screened?

If you have never had any breast problems and do not have a family history of breast cancer, then your first contact with a breast specialist should be at the age of 40. At Sanar International Hospitals we recommend this should be repeated once every year. If you have a family history of breast cancer, you must see a cancer specialist as soon as possible. The specialist will then customise your screening tests and its frequency based on the extent of your risk.

What precautions can you take?

There are some general precautions you can take to reduce the risk of breast cancer:

- Get screened for cancer regularly
- Learn the correct way of self-examination
- Make sure you self-examine your breasts on a regular basis
- Do not smoke or consume alcohol
- Be physically active, maintain a healthy body weight and follow a healthy diet

Did you know?

Every Indian woman should be aware of the following facts and figures about breast cancer:

- Breast cancer is rapidly becoming the number one cancer amongst Indian women
- 1 in 22 women in India is likely to develop breast cancer during her lifetime
- The average age of the high risk group in India is between 43 and 46 years
- Only 1 in 10 lumps (10 %) in the breast can be cancerous