

GO BIG MED

Breast Cancer Screening

By Kim Coleman, MD, Nebraska Medical Association Board Member

Mammograms are currently our most effective tool for finding breast cancer early. A mammogram uses a small dose of radiation to detect cancer so there is a risk in the test itself, but for most women the benefit of finding cancer early outweighs the risk of the radiation

Over the past several decades of breast cancer research, we've improved our ability to identify women with an especially high risk of breast cancer. We are now able to estimate *your individual lifetime risk of breast cancer* by gathering more detailed information about you. The American College of Radiology recommends all women have a breast cancer *risk assessment* by age 30 (<http://ibis.ikonopedia.com>)

Recommendations vary for when to begin screening mammograms for women with an *average risk* of breast cancer. Obstetricians, gynecologists, oncologists and radiologists recommend beginning at age 40. Family practice and internal medicine physicians recommend screening begin at age 50. This may seem confusing and the medical community is working together in the hopes of providing a more consistent set of recommendations as more studies become available.

If you have a strong family history of cancer, *especially* if you have a close relative diagnosed with breast cancer or ovarian cancer younger than age 50, you may need advanced tools such as a breast MRI or you may need screening mammogram beginning at a younger age. Some women are at higher risk for breast cancer because of a specific genetic mutation and need earlier or more advanced screening (<https://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/BRCA1-and-BRCA2-Mutations>)

All medical specialties support the individual patient's right to choose to screen earlier or later. Shared decision-making is encouraged. This means you should have a conversation with your primary care provider to discuss your personal health history, your own concerns, priorities, values and the benefits/harms of screening mammography as they directly apply to you.

In some instances a woman discovers breast cancer in the form of a breast lump sooner than a mammogram can detect it. It's important to notice any new lump or change in your breasts and take an active role in finding breast cancer at its earliest stage. Some confusion around this topic arose when two large studies did not show a benefit in *teaching* breast self-exams. While teaching a woman to examine her breasts has not been shown to be helpful, your own awareness of new lumps is vitally important to early detection.