

Is a Mammogram included in your New Year Resolutions?

The start of a new year is typically filled with setting health-driven goals and resolutions that include exercising more frequently, losing weight, eating healthier, and more. But for women, scheduling your annual mammogram should be included on that list. Breast cancer can be scary. It is not limited to one month of the year nor is it limited to a specific age group or race, which is why annual mammograms are so important. The key to early diagnosis remains screening – early and annually.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends that women ages 40 to 49 talk to their doctor or other health care professional about when to start and how often to get a mammogram. Dr. Jilma Patrick, fellowship-trained breast surgeon with OSF HealthCare, recommends screening begin at age 40 for most women.

“I prefer women start screening at age 40 if they are average risk. So what does average risk mean? It means that you don’t have any family members with a history of breast cancer or you do not have any family members with a known hereditary gene mutation that makes you more susceptible to breast cancer. If you are considered high risk, then it’s a little bit different and you may need more frequent surveillance,” advises Dr. Patrick.

Women who are under 40 with no family history of breast cancer but still want to be screened should talk to their primary care physician (PCP). Dr. Patrick explains that many women under 40 have dense breast tissue, which is why it is typically recommended to hold off on screening until after 40. However, young women are still at risk. If you are under 40 and are concerned about breast cancer, your PCP can help determine the best course of action for you.

Some women with no family history of breast cancer may not feel the need to begin screening even once they reach age 40. However, family history is only one risk factor. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), other risk factors include age, genetic mutations, dense breasts, physical activity, and weight. Some women will get breast cancer even without any risk factors.

“Breast cancers are more commonly found sporadically. And what that means is many women who are diagnosed with breast cancer have no family history of breast cancer. So we know that women need to be screened whether or not you have a family history of breast cancer,” Dr. Patrick explains.

There are multiple types of breast cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC), an aggressive form of cancer, accounts for about ten to fifteen percent of all diagnoses.

“This is a type of cancer that does not have the estrogen, progesterone, or HER2 receptors. These types of cancers are known to be more aggressive. Usually when women develop these types of cancers, it’s at an earlier age in life. And many women who have this type of cancer also are known to have the BRCA-1 gene mutation,” Dr. Patrick says.

“This is a type of cancer that we see more commonly in minorities such as African American women or Hispanic women.”

Self-breast exams and getting to know your breasts is important in helping detect any changes.

“If you have a lump in your breast, if you notice a nipple discharge, if you notice any skin changes or you notice the shape of the breast, that it’s asymmetric or it changed from the other breast – anything that looks a little different, these are things that we would want to evaluate just to ensure that there is nothing that we need to be more concerned about,” explains Dr. Patrick.

Most importantly, Dr. Patrick reminds women that breast cancer is not a death sentence – and early detection is key.

“Breast cancer treatment in general has evolved tremendously over time, and our treatment options that we have are a whole lot better than what we had 50 years ago. Women are living longer periods of time with breast cancer after they’ve been treated.”

To schedule your screening mammogram for 2021, go to www.osfhealthcare.org/breast-health/services/mammogram.