

The Seattle Breast Center Goes All-Digital

Women walking into the Seattle Breast Center at Northwest Hospital starting this May might not notice anything different immediately. They'll be visiting the same convenient facility and interacting with the same dedicated team that has been caring for them for years, but they'll soon discover one very important change. The Seattle Breast Center is now an all-digital facility, one of only a few in Washington State providing digital mammography to all patients.

"Digital mammograms are for all women," says Dr. Katherine Dee, a breast radiology specialist at the Seattle Breast Center. "Everyone who should be getting a screening mammogram should get a digital mammogram." However, she points out, a national trial in which more than 49,000 women were screened with both a digital and a standard mammogram found that digital mammography was better in particular at finding cancers in women under age 50, women with dense breast tissue, and women who had not yet reached menopause or who were just approaching menopause.

Additionally, digital mammography, combined with computer-aided detection, or CAD, improves cancer detection. The computer software marks potential areas of concern on the mammogram, alerting the radiologist to findings that may require further attention. "While CAD certainly does not detect all cancers, we have found it to be beneficial to our patients," notes Dee. "As with any technology, it is how you use it that matters."

Annual mammograms are generally recommended for all women over age forty. While there is some variation, depending on individual health and family history, the mammogram has long been accepted as the best way to assure breast health when combined with monthly self-examination of the breast.

Upgrades to the Seattle Breast Center are comprehensive. Among the improvements are three new digital acquisition mammography machines, super-accurate, computer aided detection review stations, two state-of-the-art computerized radiologist work stations, a new stereotactic biopsy table and picture archiving workstations throughout the suite.

The benefits of a digital system are many. "The technology allows a lower dose of radiation to acquire the image, so there's less exposure for the patient," explains Dee. The technologist is able to view the images on a workstation in the room to determine if the exam is finished. The result of this in-room image processing is a quicker exam and less wait time for patients. "With digital mammography, we don't have to move the pictures around, and wait for someone to prepare them before we can take a look at them," Dee adds.

Dee says all-digital mammography puts Northwest several steps ahead in terms of readiness for the next developments in breast

care and cancer prevention and diagnosis. "There are a lot of computer-related enhancements imaging specialists can do with digital mammograms and there are new, complementary technologies, such as tomosynthesis, that we can explore in conjunction with digital mammography to provide even more effective care."

Digital mammography isn't the only thing that sets the Seattle Breast Center apart.

The Seattle Breast Center is one of only three centers in Washington to provide breast MRI and MRI-guided biopsy in the same location. MRI, or magnetic resonance imaging, has appeared in recent headlines following the announcement of new recommendations from the American Cancer Society that call for annual breast MRIs for women with a strong family history of breast and/or ovarian cancer. Dee says the Seattle Breast Center has been in compliance with these recommendations since 2003, when it began providing breast MRI exams. An important plus: Seattle Breast Center patients don't have to go elsewhere for diagnostic procedures such as MRI-guided needle biopsy, and follow-up care.

"We've been telling our patients all along that this was going to become the standard of care, and now it is," Dee says.

The Seattle Breast Center performs about 500 breast MRIs a year, and those numbers are growing. "An expert at Memorial Sloan-Kettering was quoted in a recent New York Times article recommending breast MRI only from a center with a lot of experience with the procedure. At the Seattle Breast Center, a qualified breast imaging radiologist interprets the results, and if necessary, we have the capability to do an MRI-guided biopsy right here," Dee adds.

Not every breast center has radiologists that specialize in breast radiology. Dee is a board certified breast radiologist and Dr. Craig Hanson, the center's medical director, has been focused on breast radiology for more than 20 years.

"Having the right people using the right technology makes this level of care possible. It's about both technology and teamwork," says Dee, who joins with mammography technologists, breast sonographers, oncologists and surgeons to address the specific needs of each individual patient. "We see our patients as more than just cases and we strive to provide more than screening, diagnosis and treatment. We want to be an accessible health resource for all our patients and for the larger community as well."

For more information about the Seattle Breast Center, call (206) 368-1749 or visit www.nwhospital.org. To schedule an appointment, call (206) 368-5950.

