



Are breast implants safe? The Flat Truth.

One of the common questions I get in my practice concerns the relative safety of breast implants when it comes to the early detection of breast cancer. In essence the question is: do breast implants make it more difficult to detect early breast cancers on screening mammograms?

My own observations lead me to conclude that for the most part implants are relatively safe. I say this because over the past 30 years I have only seen a few cases in which the presence of implants might have delayed the diagnosis of breast cancer. I have, however, seen many women with implants who have elected not to have yearly mammograms. I have seen a fair number of these women who then presented with more advanced cancers that almost certainly would have been detected earlier and with a better prognosis, if they had chosen to have a yearly mammogram.

Before writing this section I reviewed this subject with my favorite mammographer, Dr. June Chen. She was adamant that even with the best efforts of the imaging team, it is possible to have areas within the breast that are not ideally visualized by mammography in women with implants. Thus, she did express some concern about the issue of delayed diagnosis. I asked her if in her many years of experience she had examples of women where there could have been a delay in diagnosis because of the presence of implants. She readily admitted that she could not remember a specific example, and agreed that the actual risk of a delay in diagnosis because of the presence of an implant is small.

That being said, there are some other issues that should be addressed. First, if a woman (of any age) is planning to have breast implants, it would be worthwhile to get a base line mammogram. Second, if a woman has, or plans to have implants, she should make the commitment to consistently follow early detection guidelines (see link to new guidelines if they have already been added—we are drafting them now). Also, imaging should be done at an experienced center that is familiar with the special techniques and additional studies that are needed to properly evaluate women with implants.

One of the surprising things to me is how often women with implants fail to become confident with breast self exam (BSE). One advantage of the implant is that it provides a smooth background to the breast tissue. The breast itself is spread out over this smooth surface, making the breast easier to examine. In my experience, I have seen many women who have been able to find very small cancers on self-examination. In most of these cases the cancers were more easily detected because of the presence of the implant. The unfortunate reality is that most women who do have implants do not do regular BSE with confidence.

If you have questions or comments, contact us.