An annual mammogram, by and large, isn’t exactly something most women look forward to with great anticipation. And while some women may approach a screening with a bit of trepidation, the exam is a great way for doctors to be proactive in detecting any breast health issues that might be present.
Over the years, mammogram technology has been greatly enhanced, yielding more useful data for caregivers to consider in making diagnoses. First came the conversion from film to digital mammography, and now, thanks to new advances, an imaging process known as tomosynthesis enables doctors to examine breast health in three dimensions, more efficiently and in greater detail than ever before—providing major benefits to both patients and caregivers.

A More Complete Picture
The process of acquiring imagery through tomosynthesis isn’t much different from that of a traditional mammogram, except that an additional set of images is provided to radiologists with 3-D technology that provides added views.

Is 3-D Mammography For You?
If you are interested in 3-D mammography, the best first step is to talk with your physician about whether the technology is right for you. Your doctor can help you decide the best course of action to take moving forward. If you are in need of a physician, our referral line can help! Call Health Connection at (434) 654-7009 to get connected with a physician near you.
The additional images provided in a tomosynthesis exam can offer radiologists a different perspective on tissues that normally overlap. All mammograms are X-ray exams that image soft tissues, with cancers often appearing as white spots on a scan. However, the tissues that give the breast its shape and function can sometimes also appear very white on a mammogram—especially in the case of women with more dense breast tissue—potentially masking early signs of breast cancer. Thanks to the many extra images captured by tomosynthesis, the technology provides physicians with a more complete picture of the breast, even in women with dense breasts.

Fewer Callbacks, Less Anxiety
Apart from the capabilities of 3-D mammography as a state-of-the-art tool for detecting cancer, radiologists believe one of the technology’s greatest benefits is in reducing the number of patients called back in for follow-up diagnostic testing.

The Women’s Committee of Martha Jefferson Hospital Supports Tomosynthesis Through Generous Donation

Martha Jefferson Hospital was able to accelerate plans to provide tomosynthesis (3-D breast imaging) capabilities following a generous commitment from The Women’s Committee of Martha Jefferson Hospital. In turn, The Women’s Committee thanks the community for its tremendous support as sponsors, participants and donors toward the committee’s three annual events: Martha’s Market, the In The Pink Tennis Tournament and the Squash Cancer Tournament. A total of $595,000 from event proceeds will be directed toward funding tomosynthesis at Martha Jefferson between now and 2017 as part of this multiyear funding commitment.

Candice Kurtz, who serves as a board member on The Women’s Committee, received an early diagnosis of breast cancer last year, thanks to tomosynthesis.

“I’m so proud that The Women’s Committee, through our successful fundraisers, has been able to provide funding toward the purchase of tomosynthesis mammography technology,” says Kurtz. “Tomosynthesis is truly lifesaving, and The Women’s Committee’s goal is make this technology available as routine, standard care to all women in our community, truly advancing the Caring Tradition for which Martha Jefferson Hospital has become known.”

“The support of The Women’s Committee truly makes a difference,” comments Sue Hunt, director of medical imaging at Martha Jefferson Hospital. “The committee’s efforts were a major factor in enabling Martha Jefferson to make this move to upgrade our current technology and provide 3-D mammography to our community.”

Dr. Scott Pease is a breast fellowship-trained radiologist at Martha Jefferson Hospital.
“Having this new technology really allows us to reduce the number of ‘false alarms,’” says Dr. Pease. “While that may not seem like a huge deal, reducing the need for follow-up tests makes the whole process easier on patients. Having to go back in for additional testing, and not knowing if you may or may not have breast cancer, causes a great deal of stress and anxiety for women—and even for other family members. Employing 3-D mammography allows us to see things on the first scan.”

Dr. Pease adds that reducing the need for a second look also helps to keep expenses down—both in terms of the patient’s time and the costs associated with screening.

“Anything we can do to minimize the impact on patients, while not losing our sensitivity for detecting cancer, is a wonderful thing,” notes Dr. Pease.

The Next Chapter in Mammography
An exciting new technology with multiple benefits to patients and caregivers, tomosynthesis likely signals a shift in how all mammography will be conducted in the future, according to Dr. Pease.

“In recent years, research has begun to show that with this new technology we can improve our sensitivity to detecting cancer,” notes Dr. Pease. “As a
radiologist, that is my goal and number-one focus, so anything that can aid me in that is beneficial."

Although it is impossible to predict yet who will benefit most from 3-D mammography, Dr. Pease notes that there is likely no downside risk. The overall radiation dose for a tomosynthesis exam is below FDA requirements for screening mammography and compares to doses used a decade ago in 2-D screen-film technologies. Very low X-ray energy is utilized, and no studies have demonstrated risk from such low-dose radiation in adults of screening age. Even when considering the potential for any such risks, Dr. Pease believes the benefits of early breast cancer detection far outweigh any drawbacks.

“3-D mammography is now an established technology, and its use will continue to increase in coming years,” adds Dr. Pease. “The longer we study the technique’s outcomes, the better the chance we will continue to upgrade and improve our ability as caregivers to detect breast cancer as early as possible.”

Worried About the Cost of a Mammogram? Let us Help!

Free Breast Health Screening
April 18
9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Appointments are required. Call Health Connection at (434) 654-7009 to see if you qualify.

You may qualify for this service if you don’t have insurance that covers mammograms; you are 40 or older; and it’s been more than a year since your last mammogram, or you’ve never had a mammogram.

The free screening is made possible thanks to the philanthropic support of The Women’s Committee of Martha Jefferson Hospital.
Grateful Breast Cancer Patients Give Back

Ponies Provide a Welcome Distraction at the Infusion Center

Recently patients at the Martha Jefferson Infusion Center were surprised with the pleasant distraction of ponies, in plain view through the facility’s windows, to enjoy while undergoing chemotherapy. Christy Collins and Janet Arsenault, both breast cancer patients who were diagnosed and treated at Martha Jefferson, came up with the idea as a way to show their appreciation for the hospital’s staff, as well as to brighten the days of others who are currently going through treatment.

“It can be a long day sitting there in the infusion center, but also it has to be stressful to work there,” says Arsenault. “We thought it would be neat to share some love with the staff and those who are currently undergoing treatment.”

Arsenault and Collins met each other in a Look Good, Feel Better class, a free service offered to cancer patients at Martha Jefferson Hospital. After realizing they had the same diagnosis and same stage of breast cancer, the two immediately bonded.

“Janet and Christy met in class that I was teaching, and it was apparent these two ladies had a connection,” recalls Pat Mitchell, RN, senior clinical research nurse at the Phillips Cancer Center. “It brings my heart joy to see how something terrible like a cancer diagnosis can turn two complete strangers into lifetime friends.”

Along their journeys, both of the women quickly realized the importance of support during treatment, as well as the added benefits complementary healing efforts can have on the patient experience (see story, page 13). Out of their appreciation for the added touches they received, Arsenault and Collins devised the plan to bring ponies to Martha Jefferson.

“When I was diagnosed with stage 2 triple negative breast cancer, I was desperately looking for someone with this type of breast cancer to talk to,” says Collins. “As fate would have it, I sat down at a class right next to Janet Arsenault, and since that time we have supported one another. Having gone through the cancer process, we appreciate all of the therapies Martha Jefferson Hospital has to offer. But Janet felt like the hospital was missing one—thus the ponies!”

“For many patients undergoing infusion treatment, it’s a long six to eight hours in the chair,” notes Mitchell. “These two women truly brightened the days of many—both patients and staff.”