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Your Health: Breast biopsy options vary

By Tammie Smith

Q: There are several options for getting a breast biopsy. Is one method better than another?

A: In a breast biopsy, doctors take tissue samples from suspicious areas in the breast and send those samples to pathology labs to be examined for cancer.

Ellen Shaw de Paredes, a physician, diagnostic radiologist and founder of the Ellen Shaw de Paredes Institute for Women's Imaging in western Henrico County, explained the different types of breast biopsies.

"One type is a surgical biopsy, which may be performed for something that is felt or something that has already been diagnosed as suspicious or cancer. That's done in the operating room," Paredes said. "The surgeon removes the abnormal area."

Other types use different imaging methods to locate the suspicious area and may use different types of needles to get tissue samples.

The biopsy method used depends on how doctors see the abnormality, Paredes explained.

"If we see it on ultrasound, that's usually the easiest biopsy for the patient, so we would opt for ultrasound biopsy," Paredes said.

"But if it's only seen on mammography, then we need to use stereotactic guidance, or if it's only seen on (magnetic resonance imaging), which are some of our cases, then we use MRI to guide us."

Stereotactic imaging uses a special mammography machine that takes X-ray images of the breast from different angles and uses computer analysis to pinpoint where to take the sample.

"There are needles that are smaller gauge, smaller caliber, and other needles that are a bit larger that have vacuum with them," Paredes said. "There is improved diagnostic accuracy if you use vacuum needles for calcifications, which are microscopic. Not so much for masses, it really doesn't matter," she said.

Paredes said patients sometimes worry that biopsies can spread cancer cells.

"That's really been studied, and there is no literature to support that there is what's called tumor seeding, which means that tumor cells are moved and spread to another part of the breast by doing the needle biopsy,"

she said.

"One of the important steps in performing the biopsy is that the radiologist really needs to look for concordance, which means, does the biopsy pathology result match or make sense for what the image looks like?" she said.

Virginia Health Information transparency data show that in 2009 insurance company average payment for breast biopsy was \$2,903 when the procedure was done in an ambulatory surgery center, \$733 in a physician's office and \$1,389 in a hospital outpatient department.

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