Relationship between Detector Size and the Need for Extra Images and their Effect on Radiation Exposure in Digital Mammography Screening

Zusammenhang zwischen der Detektorgröße und der Notwendigkeit von Zusatzaufnahmen sowie deren Auswirkung auf die Strahlenexposition im digitalen Mammografie-Screening

Abstract

Purpose: To determine the number of extra images (EI) that are necessary for imaging large breasts when using a detector smaller than 24 cm × 30 cm and to calculate the additional average glandular dose (AGD) for these images.

Materials and Methods: The screening mammograms taken between 2007 and 2011 were assessed for a photon counting full-field digital mammography (PCM) system (detector size: 24 cm × 26 cm) and a computed radiography (CR) system (24 cm × 30 cm). The number of EI was recorded and the AGD calculated. This AGD was compared with the mean AGD of 47 conventional full-field digital mammography (FFDM) systems.

Results: A total of 62,466 examinations were analyzed. EI had to be taken in 0.6 % (199/32,766) of all PCM examinations and 0.3 % (90/29,700) of all CR examinations. This corresponded to a total of 327 and 191 EI for the PCM and CR systems, respectively. More than one quarter of the examinations with EI were necessary because the breast was not properly positioned in the original image (PCM 31 %, CR 29 %). The mean AGD per EI was 0.7 ± 0.1 mGy for the PCM and 2.6 ± 1.2 mGy for the CR system. The mean AGD for all breast thicknesses for FFDM was 1.4 ± 0.3 mGy.

Conclusion: In general, large breasts cannot be imaged with just one image per view. The number of examinations where EI are needed is doubled with the 24 cm × 26 cm detector of the PCM system. However, the absolute number is small. The total dose, as the sum of the original and the EI, is equal to the mean AGD of a single image of the FFDM systems and lower than the dose of a single image with the CR system.

Key Points:
- When imaging large breasts, extra images are also needed on standard detectors.
- The rate of examinations with extra images is doubled with a 24 cm × 26 cm format of a photon counting mammography (PCM) system.
- The absolute number of extra images required due to detector size is small.
- The total dose (sum of original and extra image) of PCM is below dose limits.

Zusammenfassung

Ziel: Für das Mammografie-Screening ist vorgeschrieben, dass die Mamma in der gewählten Projektion mit nur einer Aufnahme adäquat abgebildet werden muss. In dieser Studie wurde untersucht, wie häufig bei Detektoren kleiner 24 cm × 30 cm Zusatzaufnahmen (ZA) notwendig werden und wie hoch die Strahlenexposition durch diese ZA ist.

Material und Methoden: Für den Zeitraum 2007 – 2011 wurde ermittelt, wie häufig bei Detektoren kleiner 24 cm × 30 cm Zusatzaufnahmen (ZA) notwendig werden und wie hoch die Strahlenexposition durch diese ZA ist.

Ergebnisse: Insgesamt wurden 62,466 Untersuchungen ausgewertet. An dem PC-DR-System...
wurden bei 0,6% (199/32 766) aller Untersuchungen 327 ZA an- 
gefertigt, an dem CR-System bei 0,3% (90/29 700) aller Untersu-
chungen 191 ZA. Mehr als ein Viertel der Untersuchungen mit 
ZA (PC-DR 31%; CR 29%) wurden dabei aufgrund einer nicht op-
timalen Einstelltechnik in der Primäraufnahme wiederholt. Die 
mittlere AGD pro ZA betrug an dem PC-DR-System 0,7 ± 0,1 mGy, 
an dem CR-System 2,6 ± 1,2 mGy. Die mittlere AGD über alle 
Brustdicken der DR-Systeme betrug 1,4 ± 0,3 mGy.

Schlussfolgerungen: Sehr große Mammae können generell nicht 
mit einer Aufnahme pro Projektion abgebildet werden. Durch die 
Verwendung eines Formats von 24 cm × 26 cm verdoppelt sich 
die Anzahl der Untersuchungen, bei denen ZA nötig werden, die 
absolute Anzahl ist jedoch gering. Die Strahlenexposition aus der 
Summe von Primär- und Zusatzaufnahmen ist bei der PC-DR-
Technologie allerdings nur genauso hoch wie im Mittel bei 
Einzelaufnahmen mit konventionellen DR-Systemen und geringer 
als am CR-System.

Introduction

It is stipulated in the Federal Covering Agreement between 
the physicians and the health insurance funds (Bundesman-
telvertrag) for the German mammography screening pro-
gram that the female breast must be able to be adequately 
imagined in the selected projection with a single X-ray image in 
every mammography unit [1]. At the same time the X-
Ray Ordinance specifies that any unnecessary radiation ex-
posure as a result of repeat imaging is to be avoided [2]. This 
is particularly important with respect to ensuring a favora-
ble risk-benefit ratio in a systematic breast cancer early 
detection program examining symptom-free women. Ac-
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According to the requirements of the Federal Covering Agree-
ment, it is assumed that additional imaging due to a detector 
size not adapted to the size of the organ can be avoided 
by the typically used mammography systems with a nominal 
detector size of 24 cm × 30 cm.

In the case of the photon counting full-field digital mammog-
raphy system (MDM L-30, Sectra Medical Systems, now Philips Healthcare), the detector, in contrast to the other-
wise typical nominal detector size of at least 24 cm × 30 cm, 
has a format of 24 cm × 26 cm. It is known from the litera-
ture that this technology has a lower AGD compared with 
conventional full-field digital mammography (FFDM) and 
CR systems [3, 4].

The frequency of additional imaging due to inadequate pri-
mary parenchyma visualization in the case of the smaller 
detector of the photon counting full-field digital mammog-
raphy (PCM) system and the extent of the additional radia-
tion exposure were examined in the present study. The 
PCM system was compared with a standard CR system of 
24 × 30 cm with respect to format and for a comparison 
with respect to dose the average glandular dose (AGD) of 
conventional FFDM systems was also determined.

Materials and Methods

The 5-year period from 2007 to 2011 was examined. The scans from two mammography units (unit A and unit B) were evaluated and compared. Mammography unit A (MU-A) used a PCM system (MDM L30, Sectra Medical Sys-
tems, now Philips Healthcare) with a nominal detector size of 
24 cm × 26 cm, and unit B (MU-B) used a CR system with 
two Carestream Health imaging plate sizes (18 cm × 24 cm 
and 24 cm × 30 cm) on a Siemens Healthcare Mammatom 
system. The details and technical data of the two systems 
are provided in Table 1. The exact field of view (active 
detector size) of the two compared systems was also deter-

mined on the basis of test images. There was an active 
detector size of 23.8 cm × 26.0 cm for the PCM detector, 
while the CR system had an active detector size of 
23.2 cm × 29.4 cm. Both analyzed digital imaging techniques 
thus had a slightly smaller field of view than nominally spe-
cified by the manufacturers.

The “MaSc” software used in mammography screening for 
documentation [5] only allows documentation of “extra images for anatomical reasons”. There is no explicit option 
to document an incompletely imagined breast. Therefore, all 
“extra images for anatomical reasons” were reexamined in 
this study and the images on which the female breast could 
not be fully visualized with one exposure in the primary ex-
amination as opposed to extra images that were repeated 
for other technical reasons (e.g. skin folds) were selected 
from these images. 

The standard examination includes four images: One cra-
nio-caudal (CC) and one medio-lateral-oblique (MLO) im-
mage on each side. An examination in which images were ac-
quired in addition to the original images (extra 
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from these images. 

The definitions of the terms are shown in Table 2.

Table: Overview of the imaging systems in mammography units A and B.
breast could have been fully visualized in the original image with better positioning. The part of the breast that could not be visualized in the original image was documented for all extra images.

For the determination and evaluation of the radiation exposure, the average glandular dose (AGD) displayed by the mammography system and the parameters tube load, X-ray tube voltage, and compression thickness were documented. The AGD could be calculated for mammography unit A on the basis of the exposure settings noted in the DICOM header. However, in the case of the CR system, the exact exposure factors, such as the X-ray tube voltage, the tube load, and the compression thickness, needed to calculate the AGD were not noted in the DICOM header of the images. Therefore, these parameters were taken from the MaSc software. Data records that were incomplete or contained errors were not included in the evaluation.

On the basis of the exposure factors, the AGD was calculated according to Dance [6, 7] (equation 1).

\[ D_{AGD} = K_e \cdot g \cdot c \cdot s \]  

The data for the calculation were taken from the MaSc program in Nordrhein-Westfalen on the basis of the values documented in the MaSc. Incomplete or incorrect data records were excluded from the calculation. The overall mean value for conventional FFDM systems was calculated from the mean values of all conventional FFDM systems and used for comparison with the average glandular doses of MU-A and MU-B.

### Table 2 Term definitions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>term</th>
<th>definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>standard examination</td>
<td>4 images (original images): One CC and one MLO image each for the left side and for the right side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>original image</td>
<td>CC or MLO image acquired during the standard examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extended examination</td>
<td>standard examination that is supplemented by additional images (extra images)</td>
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<tr>
<td>extra image</td>
<td>an image that is generated in addition to the original images of the standard examination, in addition to CC or MLO projections, this can be a cleavage projection, for example</td>
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### Results

#### Analysis of extra images

In total, 62,466 examinations were performed during the analysis period at the two compared mammography units. In 289 of these examinations (0.5%), extra images had to be acquired because the breast was not fully visualized. These extra images can be assigned to the two systems as follows:

- Extra images were required in 199 of 32,766 examinations (0.6%) using the PCM system.
- On average, 1.6 extra images were acquired in extended examinations. In total, 327 extra images were generated. It was able to be determined that 107 of the extended examinations (0.3% of the total examinations) would not have had to be supplemented by extra images (example in Fig. 1a) if a standard detector with a field of view of 24 cm × 30 cm or greater had been used.

61 of 199 extended examinations (31%) were performed on the basis of suboptimal positioning in the original images (Fig. 2). Approximately two-thirds of the cases with suboptimal positioning (41 cases) related to examinations in which extra images would not have been necessary with a standard detector.

With better positioning, extra images would have been necessary in only 138 cases (0.4% of the total examinations). The number of extended examinations performed due to the smaller detector size would have been reduced from 107 to 66 with optimal positioning. Therefore, the small field of view of the PCM detector would require extra images in 0.2% of all examinations. The examined breasts were...
so large in 72 cases that the field of view of a standard detector would not have been sufficient even with optimal positioning and extra images would still have been necessary. This corresponds to 0.2 % of all examinations of MU-A.

**Fig. 3** shows the percentages of the different projections among the extra images. With 27 % the proportion of LCC images is slightly higher than that of RCC (22 %), RMLO (19 %), and LMLO images (20 %). The percentage of cleavage images (**Fig. 1b**) is 12 %.

In the case of the MLO images, the cranial, caudal, and mammillary portions could not be visualized in the original images with approximately the same frequency, while in the case of the CC images, the lateral and medial portions were mainly affected (**Fig. 4**). The mammilla could not be imaged in only two cases on the CC scans.

Extra images were required in 90 of a total of 29,700 mammography examinations (0.3 %) in the case of the CR system. In total, 191 extra images were acquired. This corresponds to 2.1 extra images per extended examination. Extra images would not have been necessary in 29 % of the extended examinations (26 cases) if the original positioning had been better (**Fig. 5**). 22 of these extended examinations were due to the fact that the breast was positioned suboptimally. The small format (18 cm × 24 cm) was mistakenly used in 4 extended examinations. Although extra images could not have been completely avoided in 9 extended examinations, the number of extra images could have at least been reduced with better positioning since follow-up images of both sides were acquired even though only one side was not able to be fully imaged.

After exclusion of the images with incomplete visualization due to suboptimal positioning, extra images were required in 64 examinations due to an insufficient active detector.
size. This corresponds to 0.2% of all examinations performed in MU-B.

The projection had a significant influence on the rate of repetition. The greatest number of extra images was required in the case of the medio-lateral-oblique images (Fig. 6).

Approximately one-third of the extra images can be allotted to the RMLO images and one-third to the LMLO images. With 2% the percentage of cleavage images among the extra images is very low.

Part of the breast on the mammilla side was not visualized in 40% of the incompletely visualized original images (Fig. 7). The breast could not be completely imaged on the mammilla side in the MLO images in particular (65 cases). In 9 cases (5% of the extended examinations), more than one extra image in the corresponding projection was required.

Analysis of the additional radiation exposure

Fig. 8 shows the radiation exposure due to the extra images for both systems. The calculated dose values and the values displayed by the mammography system are shown. The values specified in the following relate to the calculated mean value of all breast thicknesses used.

The affected women were exposed to an additional AGD of 0.7 ± 0.1 mGy per extra image or 1.2 ± 0.7 mGy per examination in the case of the PCM system. The range of the AGD per extra image was 0.3 mGy to 1.1 mGy. The calculated AGD...
values were slightly higher than those displayed by the system (factor 1.2 ± 0.2). The mean compression thickness for the extra images was 78 ± 11 mm (MLO: 83 ± 12 mm, CC: 75 ± 9 mm) in MU-A. The interpolated EUREF limiting value for this compression thickness is 4.85 mGy.

An additional average glandular dose of 2.6 ± 1.2 mGy per extra image was applied in the case of the CR system. The additional AGD in an extended examination with one or more extra images was 7.0 ± 3.8 mGy. The range of the AGD per extra image was 0.4 mGy to 9.0 mGy. The calculated dose values correlated well with the display values of the device documented in the MaSc software (factor 1.0 ± 0.2).

The mean compression thickness was 66 ± 11 mm (MLO: 69 ± 10 mm, CC: 58 ± 10 mm) in MU-B. The interpolated EUREF limiting value for this compression thickness was 3.52 mGy.

For the year 2011 the AGD of the 47 studied FFDM systems was 1.4 ± 0.3 mGy per image. The range of the average glandular dose was 0.8 mGy to 2.2 mGy per image. The mean compression thickness of the FFDM systems was 56 ± 3 mm.

**Discussion**

In principle, the requirement of the Federal Covering Agreement to visualize the breast with only one image per selected projection cannot be fulfilled even with a 24 cm × 30 cm detector. This coincides with the results of the screening program in the UK in which the breast was not able to be visualized with one image in the MLO projection in 1.1 % of all participants even though a 24 cm × 30 cm format was used [10].

Using the PCM detector with field of view of only 24 cm × 26 cm increases the rate of extended examinations required due to incompletely visualized breasts from 0.3 % to 0.6 %. These numbers are significantly below the upper limit of 3 % defined in the Federal Covering Agreement for the percentage of women requiring repeat imaging due to limitations in the diagnostic image quality [1].

Some extra images had to be acquired on the basis of sub-optimal positioning for the original images. In mammography unit A, 31 % of the extended examinations (0.2 % of all examinations) were the result of suboptimal positioning and this number was 29 % (0.1 % of all examinations) in MU-B. Training of radiographers with respect to positioning in the case of large breasts therefore continues to be important and necessary regardless of the detector size in order to lower the number of extended examinations.

After exclusion of the images that were repeated due to suboptimal positioning and the images in MU-A resulting from the small field of view of the PCM detector, 0.2 % of all breasts could not be fully visualized with one image in both units.

The relatively high percentage of cleavage images in MU-A can be explained by the fact that an explicit effort is made in mammography unit A to perform a cleavage projection instead of the two cranio-caudal projections in extended examinations since the radiation exposure for a cleavage image is usually slightly lower due to the smaller area of overlap than in two separate images for the left and right breast. However, it is not always possible to acquire a cleavage image. The high percentage of cleavage images in MU-A is also the reason that the number of extra images

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**Fig. 6** Percentage of different projections among the extra images on the CR system (MU-B).

**Fig. 7** Schematic representation of the non-visualized parts of the breast in the medio-lateral-oblique (left) and cranio-caudal (right) images on the CR system (MU-B). The numbers indicate the number of images in which the particular area was not visualized. In some cases more than one part was not visualized.
A limitation of the study is the use of a relatively small collective due to the comparison of only two mammography units resulting in the examination of only two devices. However, an expansion of the study to include additional mammography units and more types of devices would probably not affect the results since the study included a significant number of cases and in general only a few women were affected by the small detector size.

A further possible limitation of the study is that the exposure settings are not stored in the DICOM header in the case of the CR system. Instead, this data is entered in the MaSc software after the examination. Incorrect data records may not have been fully identified and therefore may have been included in the calculations.

In summary, the increase in the rate of repetition caused by the small field of view of the PCM detector seems acceptable due to the overall low number of extended examinations and the equivalent or even lower radiation exposure despite additional exposures.

### Summary

It is not possible with any of the detectors used in mammography screening to adequately visualize very large breasts with only one image per projection. In these cases extra images are needed to completely visualize the female breast. Therefore, the requirement of the Federal Covering Agreement cannot be fulfilled. The use of the examined PCM system with a detector size of 24 cm × 26 cm doubles the rate of extra images but at a rate of 107 of 32,766 cases (0.3 %) is still well below the limiting value of the Federal Covering Agreement (3 %). The total dose (sum of original and extra image) of the PCM system is equal to the mean AGD of a single image of the FFDM systems and lower than the dose of a single image with CR system.

### Clinical relevance of the study

- Extra images are needed to fully visualize very large breasts even when using standard detectors with a size of 24 cm × 30 cm.
- Using a PCM system with a 24 cm × 26 cm format doubles the rate of examinations with extra images. The absolute number of extra images due to the smaller detector size is nevertheless low (< 1 %).
- The total average glandular dose from the original and extra image corresponds to a single image with a conventional FFDM system and is well below the dose of a single image with CR system.

### References

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