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Mammograms Again Found to Have No Impact on Mortality

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Do annual mammograms save lives? Several studies over the past few years have concluded that mammograms do not save lives, and may actually harm more women than they help, courtesy of false positives, over treatment, and radiation-induced cancers. According to research published in 2010, the reduction in mortality as a result of mammographic screening was so small as to be nonexistent — a mere 2.4 deaths per 100,000 person-years were spared.

Another study published in *The Lancet Oncology* in 2011 demonstrated, for the first time, that women who received the most breast screenings had a *higher* cumulative incidence of invasive breast cancer over the following six years than the control group who received far less screenings. Now, researchers from Harvard and Dartmouth have published a paper in which they present similar conclusions.

Mammograms Have No Impact on Breast Cancer Mortality

After analyzing cancer registry data from 16 million women in 547 counties across the United States, they found “no evident correlation between the extent of screening and 10-year breast cancer mortality.” The researchers concluded that mammograms primarily find small, typically harmless, or non-lethal tumors, leading to widespread overdiagnosis. As explained by Dr. Otis Webb Brawley, chief medical officer of the American Cancer Society and author of the book, *How We Do Harm*, the term “overdiagnosis” in cancer medicine refers to:

“...a tumor that fulfills all laboratory criteria to be called cancer but, if left alone, would never cause harm. This is a tumor that will not continue to grow, spread, and kill. It is a tumor that can be cured with treatment but does not need to be treated and/or cured.”

Also, echoing results found in 2011, higher screening rates were associated with higher incidence of breast cancer. As reported by *The LA Times*:

“For every 10-percentage-point increase in screening rates, the incidence of breast cancer rose by 16 percent... That worked out to an extra 35 to 49 breast cancer cases for every 100,000 women...”

To Screen or Not to Screen?

Clearly, the issue of breast cancer screening using mammography can be a deeply emotional one. Virtually all discussions relating to cancer are. A recent article in *Forbes Magazine* paints a vivid picture of most women’s fears, and warns of the dangers of not getting diagnosed in time. While it needs to be an individual choice, I believe it can be valuable to take a step back and look at the big picture, which includes population-based statistics such as those presented above. It’s also well worth investigating all available options and, of course, weigh the risks and benefits associated with each. As reported by Care2:

“[The] study authors... point to a balance of benefits and harms and believe mammography is likely most favorable when directed at women who are at high risk — not too rarely and not too frequently. They also believe watchful waiting, rather than immediate active treatment, is probably a good option in some cases.”

A main objection to mammography is the fact that it uses ionizing radiation to take images of your

breasts, and it's a well-established fact that ionizing radiation can cause cancer. So the idea that the "best" way for you to avoid dying from cancer is to expose yourself to cancer-promoting radiation at regular intervals for decades on end (in order to catch the cancer early) really falls short on logic — especially since there are non-ionizing radiation imaging techniques available.

Mammograms Do Not Reduce Mortality Beyond That of Physical Examination

Last year, one of the largest and longest investigations into mammography was published. It involved 90,000 women who were followed for 25 years, and it sent shockwaves through the medical industry when it reported that the death rates from breast cancer were virtually identical among women who got annual mammograms and those who did not. Moreover, it found that mammography screening had harmful effects. As reported by *The New York Times*:

“One in five cancers found with mammography and treated was not a threat to the woman’s health and did not need treatment such as chemotherapy, surgery, or radiation.”

The rate of overdiagnosis (22 percent) is virtually identical to that found in a 2012 Norwegian study, which found that as many as 25 percent of women are consistently overdiagnosed with breast cancer that, if left alone, would cause no harm. Other studies that have come to similar conclusions include the following:

- In 2007, the *Archives of Internal Medicine* published a meta-analysis of 117 randomized, controlled mammogram trials. Among its findings: rates of false-positive results are high (20-56 percent after 10 mammograms)
- A 2009 meta analysis by the Cochrane Database review found that breast cancer screening led to a 30 percent rate of overdiagnosis and overtreatment, which increased the absolute risk of developing cancer by 0.5 percent. The review concluded that for every 2,000 women invited for screening throughout a 10 year period, the life of just ONE woman was prolonged, while 10 healthy women were underwent unnecessary treatment.

Know the Signs and Symptoms of Breast Cancer

Mammograms can also miss the presence of cancer. According to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), mammograms miss up to 20 percent of breast cancers present at the time of screening. Your risk for a false negative is particularly great if you have dense breast tissue, and an estimated 49 percent of women do. Mammography's sensitivity for dense breasts is as low as 27 percent, which means that about **75 percent of dense-breasted women are at risk for a cancer being missed if they rely solely on mammography**. Even with digital mammography, the sensitivity is still less than 60 percent.

Considering the mortality rate from breast cancer is virtually identical whether you get an annual mammogram or an annual physical breast exam, it suggests physical examination can go a long way toward detecting a potential cancer. It certainly makes sense to familiarize yourself with your breasts and the signs and symptoms of breast cancer. If you notice any of the following symptoms, be sure to address it with your doctor, even if you're not due for an annual checkup yet.

- Lump in the breast (keep in mind that breast lumps are common, and most are not cancerous)
- Pain or unusual tenderness or swelling in the breast
- Retracted nipple
- Nipple discharge
- Vaginal pain
- Dimpling of the breast surface, and/or “orange peel” skin texture
- Visible veins on the breast
- Change in size or shape of the breast
- Enlarged lymph nodes (located in the armpit)
- Unintentional weight loss