

# Women need mammograms, but when-and how often?

By Irene Maher, Tampabay.com, September 26, 2009

All major medical groups in the United States recommend regular mammograms for women age 50 and older, the group in which most tumors occur.

But the experts don't agree on annual screening for women between ages 40 and 49.

The American Cancer Society, the American College of Radiology, the American Medical Association and the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology all recommend annual mammograms starting at age 40.

The American College of Physicians, the professional organization for doctors who specialize in internal medicine, recommends screening mammograms every one to two years for women between ages 40 and 49.

The recommendation is based on findings released in 2002 by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, which looked at the benefits of mammography in younger women. The task force, sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, is a panel of independent experts who review medical practices and research to recommend which preventive services should be included in primary medical care. The task force found that annual mammograms clearly save lives in women age 50 and older — the breast cancer mortality rate has dropped 22 percent in these women during the past decade, in large part because of annual mammograms and early diagnosis.

But the evidence is weaker in younger women, in part because breast cancer is less common before age 50, and because there is a higher likelihood of false positive results and unnecessary tissue biopsies. The task force concluded that doctors and their patients under age 50 should decide on an individual basis about when to start and the frequency of mammograms.

Dr. Christine Laronga, a surgical oncologist and chief of the Comprehensive Breast Program at Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, says the issue is how often mammograms predict breast cancer in younger women. "In older women, mammograms are easy to read, the test is cheap and the accuracy is high," she says. But in women in their 40s who have higher breast density (less fatty tissue in their breasts), the mammogram is more difficult to read.

In younger women, "The X-ray is more white, making it harder to find cancer. It's like looking for a snowball in a snow-covered front yard," she says. In a fatty breast, the image looks mostly black and doctors can detect a tumor about the size of a grain of rice.

Laronga recommends annual mammograms starting at age 40. "The thing about mammograms is they pick up calcifications that you would never feel," she says, the size of grains of sand. With

regular mammograms, you are also more likely to discover subtle changes in images from one year to the next, increasing the odds of finding cancer in its earliest, most curable stages.

Then, there's the question of deciding which patients can skip a year between mammograms. A family history (having a mother, sibling or child with breast cancer, particularly when diagnosed younger than age 50) is a factor in only a small percentage of cases.

"The majority of my patients say there's no one in my family with breast cancer, they live a healthy lifestyle, don't smoke, don't drink, and the truth is we don't know how they got breast cancer. So how do you decide who should skip a year?"

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Mammograms catch tumors at their earliest, smallest stage. Many experts say you should be vigilant for signs of change in your own breasts, including:

- A breast lump.
- Swelling of all or part of the breast.
- Skin irritation or dimpling  
of breast skin.
- Breast pain.
- Nipple turned inward.
- Redness, scaling or thickening of the nipple or breast.
- Nipple discharge other than breast milk.
- Underarm lump.

SOURCE: American Cancer Society