Is It Time to Revise Breast Cancer Screening Guidelines?

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Guidelines on when and how often women should get a mammogram vary. But new findings published in the journal Cancer suggest that breast cancer screenings ought to begin five years earlier than currently recommended in order to prevent early breast cancer death, reports HealthDay. The American Cancer Society (ACS) recommends annual mammograms from age 45 to 54 and every other year starting at age 55.

For the study, researchers used computer modeling to examine three major mammogram recommendations: annual screening from age 40 to 84; annual screening at ages 45 to 54 and then every other year from 55 to 79; or every other year from 50 to 74. Scientists then determined how many lives could be saved if every U.S. woman born in 1960 followed one of the three recommendations each year.

Results indicated that with annual screenings from age 40 to 84, breast cancer deaths would decline by an average of 40 percent, equating to 29,400 lives saved. With screenings starting at age 45 and then every other year from 55 until age 79, deaths would decrease to 31 percent (about 22,800 women spared). Finally, with mammograms every other year from 50 to 74, deaths would dip to 23 percent (equal to about 17,200 lives).

“If a woman wants to maximize her chances of averting an untimely breast cancer death,” said R. Edward Hendrick, PhD, a radiology professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and the study’s coauthor, “she should start screening at age 40 and continue screening annually until her life expectancy is less than five to seven years.”

Limitations on the research included that scientists didn’t examine costs, whether existing machines and staff members could handle a surge in women getting mammograms and whether the additional money spent on such screening could be put to better use.

Some experts support following the ACS’s current guidelines for screenings (annually starting at age 45 and shifting to every other year at age 55). But they also believe that it’s key to develop a better test to detect breast cancer than the mammogram.

Click here to read about the ACS’s guidelines that scale back breast cancer screenings for younger women.

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