



New Twist on Mammography Controversy

The mammography controversy continues. In a recent publication from the prestigious British Medical Journal (Dec. 8 2011), it was concluded that screening mammography provides only a 15% mortality reduction from breast cancer. These findings are consistent with a controversial report from the United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF). (See Reference: <http://beawarefoundation.org/good-news>)

The study from the British Medical Journal concluded that for many women the anxieties associated with being called back for additional views and the trauma associated with a negative biopsy result are of such a magnitude, that they may outweigh the potential benefits of screening mammogram. The authors concluded women should be encouraged to assess the risks and benefits of screening mammography and come to their own conclusion about the need for screening.

Of course studies like these create confusion. Fortunately, two recent studies reported on this year (2011) provide future evidence that screening mammograms are very effective in saving lives and routine yearly screening should start at age 40.

The most impressive study is a recent update of the one done in Sweden. In this study Dr. Tabar reports on a study of 130,000 women who were followed for more than 29 years. This updated recent study reinforces his previous findings that regular screening reduces breast cancer deaths by more than 30%.

Another study of more than 1 million women followed for more than 16 years demonstrated a similar 30% mortality reduction in women between 40 and 50 years of age, which is the most challenging group because of the tendency for these women to have dense breasts.

Equally important is the observation that women who consistently do their mammograms on a yearly basis have an even greater breast cancer reduction than women who are less consistent in obtaining their early mammograms.

The issue of harm from a mammogram seems to be grossly overestimated in the study reported in the BMJ. The article refers to the anxiety associated with being called back for additional views as well as the trauma associated with going through a biopsy that proves to be benign (i.e. not cancer). Granted this can be a traumatic experience for many women, but a screening mammogram has the potential to be life saving. The majority of cancers identified on a screening mammogram do not require mastectomies, and in many cases chemotherapy can be avoided. For the vast majority of women, the benefits far outweigh the risks.

Unfortunately, the study from the BMJ will give some woman an excuse to forgo a mammogram, and in some of those cases the opportunity for a curative operation will be missed.

If you have any questions on the value of screening mammography or other questions on breast care, feel free to Ask The Doctor or contact us.