

Stick with the evidence: Women should begin mammograms in 40s

In the November 17, 2009 issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) issued recommendations suggesting women refrain from getting their mammograms until age 50, and continue every two years thereafter.

With my colleagues at Invision Sally Jobe, I support the Society of Breast Imaging, the American College of Radiology, American Cancer Society, and many other respected professional organizations in their strong opposition to the new guidelines.

The American Cancer Society's (ACS) current screening guidelines state that women at average risk for breast cancer should have their first mammogram by age 40 and should repeat mammograms every one to two years thereafter. This can reduce the risk of dying of breast cancer by 20 to 25 percent for women aged 40 years or older.

The USPSTF, a government panel of doctors and scientists, uses a very conservative methodology, which significantly underestimates the benefit of modern mammography. While the ACS examines all the data examined by the USPSTF, the ACS more carefully examines each individual study, and many studies not examined by the USPSTF that provide newer information.

Still, the USPSTF's own evidence review concludes that mammography reduces the risk of dying in women in their 40s and 50s at about the same rate, in fact, for women in their 40s the rate is just a little bit better....essentially the same (RR 0.85 vs. 0.86). Modern studies show that the risk of dying of breast cancer in women diagnosed in their 40s is reduced by 30 to 45 percent, not 15 percent.

Because fewer women develop breast cancer in their 40s compared with women in their 50s and older, the USPSTF has said the small benefit isn't worth the cost of screening in that age group. Among the costs are false positive examinations, including procedures. The USPSTF did not cite the literature that reveals that women do not regard these costs as important harms.

As for the screening interval, annual screening is especially important for women under age 55, and still produces better results for women 55-plus. As for false positives, you do not double the rate with annual screening compared with biennial screening, and in fact, attending the same high quality facility on a regular basis reduces the likelihood of false alarms.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in women, and the second leading cause of death from cancer. It is the leading cause of death from cancer in young women, and the leading cause of premature mortality from cancer in women.

While only 1 in 69 (1.5 percent) women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their 40s, we cannot say with any certainty if, or when, a woman will develop breast cancer. But based on evidence we can say that her odds of dying of breast cancer are increased if her cancer is diagnosed after symptoms develop. For this reason, regular mammograms are an important part of women's preventive health care beginning at age 40.

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Sky Ridge Medical Center is a partner with Invision Sally Jobe Breast Center; our location is conveniently located at Lincoln Medical Center, one mile east of the Sky Ridge campus, just off Lincoln.