

## Mammograms reduce breast cancer risk

### Annual testing increases survival rate

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The statistics from a recent study are startling: Women diagnosed with breast cancer by a routine mammogram have a 95 percent chance of surviving.

For women diagnosed later, who haven't received routine mammograms, the chance of dying is 56 percent.

"Having an annual mammogram is the most important thing a woman can do to decrease their risk of dying of breast cancer," said Debbie Saslow, director of breast and gynecologic cancer for the American Cancer Society in Atlanta.

The study was conducted by Dr. Blake Cady of Cambridge Hospital Breast Center and Harvard Medical School in Massachusetts and colleagues, who looked at nearly 7,000 breast cancer patients between 1990 and 1999. The group was followed through 2007.

A mammogram is a low-dose X-ray that can detect signs of breast cancer tumors before they are large enough to be felt. The American Cancer Society recommends that women older than 40 have a mammogram every year to screen for signs of cancer.

"Nobody really knows the switch that turns breast cancer on and off, so all we can do now is do our best to find it before it becomes a killer," said Dr.

Susan Roux, medical director of the Breast Care Center at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula.

Early detection, Roux said, is crucial. If the cancer can be caught before it has spread and before it is large enough to be felt, a woman's chances of survival are much greater.

"If the woman waits to feel a lump in their breast, then 50 percent of the time, that (cancer) has already spread to her body," said Roux. "So we want to really bring the time of diagnoses way back."

Roux estimates that if all breast cancers were diagnosed when their size is half an inch or less, the chance of surviving the cancer would be higher than 95 percent.

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and physicians and the American Cancer Society are advocating the importance of getting a mammogram every 12 months.

Moreover, Roux said, it is important to get the message out to women in their early 40s.

"Younger women, who seem to be the least aware that they are at risk, actually have the most aggressive cancers," said Roux.

In the Breast Care Center last year, Roux said, a quarter of the diagnosed breast cancer cases were in women in their early 40s.

Mammograms may even be necessary for some women under 40. When local resident Michelle Slade, 33, went to visit her gynecologist for her regular checkup two years ago, he felt he should refer Slade for a mammogram.

His hunch paid off: Slade had breast cancer, but,

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thanks to the mammogram, it was caught early and she has made a full recovery.

"I am very grateful that I had a doctor that didn't hesitate to refer me out for a mammogram even though I wasn't in the at-risk age group," Slade said. "I basically credit him with saving my life."

Also, women shouldn't think they are safe just because they have no close family members with breast cancer.

"Eighty-five percent of all breast cancer sufferers have no family history of the cancer," said Roux.

Still, many women are not scheduling regular mammograms, Saslow said.

Simple lack of awareness and knowledge about mammograms plays a part, she said.

"Some women think that cancer is a death experience, so if they have cancer they don't want to know about it," Saslow said.

Some women are afraid of the radiation, Roux said. But mammograms, she said, are one of the lowest dosages of radiation in all of medicine.

Time can also be an issue.

"Women who are striving to feed their kids and work long hours don't have the time to take care of themselves," she said. "But you have to take care of yourself if you are going to take care of other people."

Also, said Roux, some women believe that getting a mammogram is painful. The Monterey Breast Care Center has maximized the comfort of the mammograms with a soft foam pad, she said.

The pad costs the center \$70,000 a year is worth it if it gets women to have mammograms, said Roux.

Economics also plays a part: Some women believe they simply can't afford to have a mammogram.

"It is so expensive to live here that a lot of women .. are maybe electing to put food on the table for their kids instead of getting their own mammogram screening," said Slade.

However, in Monterey, every effort is being made to overcome any economic barrier to using the facility.

The Breast Care Center already offers mammograms for women who can't afford them through the Sherry Cockle Memorial Fund. And Wednesday, the center received a \$30,000 grant from the Safeway Foundation to help those in need.

It appears the message is getting through to local women.

"Women are really interested in doing something that they consider a little uncomfortable so that they get to enjoy their lives with their kids and grandkids," Roux said.

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