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The Breast Cancer Screening Mistake Millions Make...

Posted By [Dr. Mercola](#) | October 15 2010 | 51,330 views

A new study reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* suggests that increased awareness and improved treatments rather than mammograms are the main force in reducing the breast cancer death rate.

The study, medical experts say, is the first to assess the benefit of mammography in the context of the modern era of breast cancer treatment.

While it is unlikely to settle the debate over mammograms — and experts continue to disagree about the value of the test — it indicates that improved treatments with hormonal therapy and other targeted drugs may have, in a way, washed out most of mammography's benefits by making it less important to find cancers when they are too small to feel.

As stated by the *New York Times*:

"In the new study, mammograms, combined with modern treatment, reduced the death rate by 10 percent, but the study data indicated that the effect of mammograms alone could be as low as 2 percent or even zero.

A 10 percent reduction would mean that if 1,000 50-year-old women were screened over a decade, 996 women rather than 995.6 would not die from the cancer — an effect so tiny it may have occurred by chance."

Dr. Mercola's Comments:

Mammograms are often touted as a "life-saving" form of cancer screening, responsible for reducing breast cancer death rates by 15-25 percent. But this reported benefit is based on outdated studies done *decades* ago ...

The *New England Journal of Medicine* is one of the most prestigious medical journals and it has now published the first *recent* study to look at the effectiveness of mammograms in years, and their findings are a far cry from what most public health officials and physicians would have you believe.

A Close to ZERO Percent Benefit ...

In the latest study, researchers analyzed data from over 40,000 Norwegian women with breast cancer and found that those who had mammograms and were treated by special breast cancer medical teams had a 10 percent lower breast cancer death rate than women who had neither.

However, they also found that women over the age of 70 who were treated by the special teams had an 8 percent lower death risk from breast cancer, even though they had not received mammograms.

What this suggests, and what Dr. H. Gilbert Welch wrote in an accompanying editorial, is that mammograms may have only reduced the cancer death rate by 2 percent -- an amount so small it may as well be zero.

So the fact remains that there is no solid evidence that mammograms save lives. Past research has also demonstrated that adding an annual mammogram to a careful physical examination of the breasts does not improve breast cancer survival rates over getting the examination alone.

Now, if mammograms were completely safe and capable of reducing your cancer death risk even a small amount, you might be able to make an argument for their use. But mammograms are not only ineffective ... they're unsafe as well.

The Dangers of Mammography: Ionizing Radiation

The first problem with mammograms is that they use ionizing radiation at a relatively high dose, which in and of itself can contribute to the development of breast cancer. Mammograms expose your body to radiation that can be *1,000 times greater* than that from a chest x-ray, which we know poses a cancer risk.

Mammography also compresses your breasts tightly, which could lead to a dangerous spread of cancerous cells, should they exist. Dr. Charles B. Simone, a former clinical associate in immunology and pharmacology at the National Cancer Institute, said:

"Mammograms increase the risk for developing breast cancer and raise the risk of spreading or metastasizing an existing growth."

Dr. Samuel Epstein, one of the top cancer experts, similarly stated:

"The premenopausal breast is highly sensitive to radiation, each 1 rad exposure increasing breast cancer risk by about 1 percent, with a cumulative 10 percent increased risk for each breast over a decade's screening."

False Positives are Alarming Common

The second glaring problem with mammography is its unacceptably high rate of false positives.

If a mammogram detects an abnormal spot in a woman's breast, the next step is typically a biopsy. This involves taking a small amount of tissue from the breast, which is then looked at by a pathologist under a microscope to determine if cancer is present.

The problem is that early stage cancer like ductal carcinoma in situ, or D.C.I.S., can be very hard to diagnose, and pathologists have a wide range of experience and expertise. There are no diagnostic standards for D.C.I.S., and there are no requirements that the pathologists doing the readings have specialized expertise.

Dr. Shahla Masood, the head of pathology at the University of Florida College of Medicine in Jacksonville, told the *New York Times*:

"There are studies that show that diagnosing these borderline breast lesions occasionally comes down to the flip of a coin."

Of course, upon receiving a breast cancer diagnosis, most women are afraid and even frantic to do whatever it takes to fight and remove the cancer. In the conventional medical arena, typically this means full or partial mastectomy, drugs and radiation.

Imagine going through surgery, having one or both of your breasts removed along with receiving debilitating radiation treatments and toxic drugs, only to later be told that you never had cancer.

This scenario happens more often than you might think, and you can read about several women's terrifying ordeals with false breast cancer diagnoses here.

How Often do Mammograms Lead to False Positive Diagnoses?

Estimates suggest that 17 percent of D.C.I.S. cases found through needle biopsy (often the next step after a mammogram detects a mass) are misdiagnosed. The *New York Times* also reported on several other concerning findings about the frequency of misdiagnosis:

- A 2006 study by Susan G. Komen for the Cure estimated that in 90,000 cases when women were diagnosed with D.C.I.S. or invasive breast cancer, they either did not have the disease or they got incorrect treatment due to a pathologist error.
- A 2002 study at Northwestern University Medical Center found that nearly 8 percent of 340 breast cancer cases " had errors serious enough to change plans for surgery."
- Dr. Lagios, a pathologist at St. Mary's Medical Center in San Francisco, reviewed nearly 600 breast cases in 2007 and 2008 and found discrepancies in 141 of them.

Mammograms also carry a first-time false positive rate of up to 6 percent. False positives can lead to unnecessary emotional stress and expensive repeat screenings, exposing you to even more radiation. Plus, as discussed earlier, they can sometimes result in unnecessary invasive procedures including biopsies, unnecessary surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and more.

The BEST Way to Lower Your Risk of Breast Cancer

Mammograms will not *prevent you* from getting breast cancer, and the latest study shows they offer very little benefit in improving your chances of survival if you do have it. So the best strategy, which I encourage all women to embark upon today, is not to simply get your yearly mammogram and hope for the best -- it's to make lifestyle changes that will significantly cut your cancer risks in the first place.

Researchers estimate that about 40 percent of U.S. breast cancer cases, or about 70,000 cases every year, could be prevented by making lifestyle changes.

A healthy diet, regular physical exercise, and an effective way to manage your emotional health are the cornerstones of just about any cancer prevention program, including breast cancer, but you will also want to make sure your vitamin D levels are optimized.

Vitamin D, a steroid hormone that influences virtually every cell in your body, is easily one of nature's most potent cancer fighters.

According to one landmark study, some 600,000 cases of breast and colorectal cancers could be prevented each year if vitamin D levels among populations worldwide were increased. And that's just counting the death toll for two types of cancer (it actually works against at least 16 different types)!

So please do watch my one-hour free lecture on vitamin D to find out what your optimal vitamin D levels should be ... and how to get them there. This is one of the most important steps you can take to protect yourself from cancer.

There's also research showing that by simply supplementing your diet with animal-based omega-3 fats like krill oil you may reduce your breast cancer risk by 32 percent, so this is another strategy I suggest you embrace.

What about Screening?

Effective cancer screening methods are important, but mammography is simply NOT a safe or effective cancer screen. Instead, I strongly advise you to consider the safer and more effective alternative of [thermographic breast screening](#), especially if you are younger and have not already been diagnosed with, or undergone treatment for, breast cancer.

By measuring the radiation of infrared heat from your body, thermographic screening can detect signs of breast cancer without any ionizing radiation or mechanical pressure.

It can provide a picture of the early stages of angiogenesis -- the formation of a direct supply of blood to cancer cells, which is a necessary step before they can grow into tumors of size.

I recently [discussed this mechanism in another article](#). In it, Dr. Li presents compelling evidence that by including more anti-angiogenetic foods in your diet, you may be able to effectively starve cancer and prevent tumors from ever forming since they must have sufficient blood supply to thrive, just like all other cells.

Were you to undergo a thermographic screening and discover that angiogenesis is taking place, meaning that tiny blood vessels have begun sprouting to an area to feed cancer cells, you now have YEARS at your disposal to effectively "cure yourself" (although by conventional standards you're not yet ill) by implementing lifesaving lifestyle changes.

This would logically include increased amounts of anti-angiogenetic foods such as red grapes, berries, turmeric and broccoli, just to name a few. For more information, I recommend [watching Dr. Li's video](#).

If you'd like more information about thermography, simply click the button below.



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Source: [New York Times September 23, 2010](#)

Source: [New England Journal of Medicine September 23, 2010: 363\(13\):1203-10](#)

Related Links:

- » [Stop! Read This BEFORE You Get that Mammogram...](#)
- » [What If You Went through a Mastectomy, Only to Discover Your Diagnosis Was False?](#)
- » [The Real Reason Why Breast Cancer is Plummeting](#)