

GOOD NEWS FOR WOMEN

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There has been a great deal of confusion about breast cancer screening that has resulted from several published reports that suggested that very large numbers of women need to be screened using mammography to save one life. In a study presented to the San Antonio Breast Cancer conference, experts from the U.S. and U.K. reviewed the various studies that had reported very large numbers. They found that the reasons for these large estimates was based on the methods used by the reviewers and not the true numbers of women who would need to, actually, be screened to save a life. For example, the US Preventive Services Task Force miscalculated the number, in part, because they used studies that invited women to participate in screening. Many of the women refused to be screened, but the data the USPSTF called "Number needed to screen", was actually the larger number needed to invite to be screened. When the present reviewers looked at the actual numbers of women who participated in screening the "number needed to screen" was far lower than what was published by the USPSTF. The authors only looked at women ages 50-79 because these are the ages being screened in Europe, but other studies have shown that the "number needed to be screened" for women in their forties is also much lower than estimated by the USPSTF and others (1,2).

This is good news for women. Although breast cancer is the leading cause of non-preventable cancer death among women in the U.S. it still is found in only 1-6 women per 1000 each year, so it is not surprising that a number of women will need to be screened to save one life. However, the major scientific studies have clearly shown that screening beginning at the age of 40 saves lives. This latest study shows that screening is more efficient in saving lives than some have suggested. Prior to 1990, the death rate from breast cancer had been unchanged for 50 years. Screening began in the U.S. in the mid 1980's and the death rate began to fall soon after. There are now more than 30% fewer deaths from breast cancer each year in the U.S. than there would have been in the absence of screening. Therapies have improved, but therapy saves lives when breast cancers are treated early. Mammography is not perfect, but until there is a universal cure, or a safe way to prevent breast cancer, thousands of lives can be saved by annual screening beginning at the age of 40.

References

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