

## Yearly mammograms protect breast cancer survivors

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Older women who get yearly mammograms after treatment of early-stage breast cancer are less likely to die from breast cancer, according to a study in the July 20, 2007 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*.

The researchers examined five years of follow-up on almost 2,000 patients age 65 and older with stage I and II breast cancer at six integrated health care delivery systems in the Cancer Research Network (CRN), including Group Health.

“Our large study, with nearly complete follow-up, shows that regular post-therapy surveillance lowers the rate of death from breast cancer,” said Timothy Lash, DSc, MPH, the paper's lead author. Lash is an associate professor of epidemiology at Boston University School of Public Health.

“An important finding of this study is that not all older women who are breast cancer survivors are receiving annual mammograms,” said Rebecca Silliman, MD, PhD, a professor of medicine and public health at Boston University Schools of Medicine and Public Health.

“These findings are consistent with other studies conducted in different places showing that older women with breast cancer often receive less care than do younger ones,” Dr. Silliman added. “Our study demonstrates that receiving annual surveillance mammography after breast cancer diagnosis may have the opportunity to decrease death from breast cancer.”

The number of older women with breast cancer is forecast to double by 2030, as baby boomers age, according to Diana Buist, PhD, MPH, Group Health Center for Health Studies Associate Investigator and co-author of the study. “So it’s important that health care systems provide effective outreach through phone calls and letters to older breast cancer survivors,” she said.

Experts agree that all breast cancer survivors with no symptoms should get yearly “surveillance” mammography routinely, regardless of their age. “Screening” mammography is for women who have never had breast cancer; and “diagnostic” mammography is for those with symptoms.

An accompanying editorial by Georgetown University’s Jeanne Mandelblatt, MD, draws attention to the importance of this study and other health services research for the "war against cancer." She cites this research as “an excellent example” of how “high-quality research services research ... fills gaps left by clinical trials and can guide clinical care and policy for the growing older population of cancer survivors.”

Source: Group Health Cooperative Center for Health Studies

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