No need for gene screens in breast cancer families

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Research reported today should provide relief to women who are worried after a relative's breast cancer diagnosis. The study in the open access journal *BMC Cancer* shows that a family history of breast cancer does not give a useful indication of the likelihood that a woman will develop it herself at an early age.

An increased risk of breast cancer for relatives of breast cancer patients has been demonstrated in many studies. As physicians and the general population have become more aware of this increased risk, the demand for referring healthy women with a family history of breast cancer for intensive screening or genetic testing has risen. Geertruida H. de Bock led a team from Leiden University Medical Centre in the Netherlands who investigated whether the increased risk was significant enough to accurately predict breast cancer.

According to de Bock, "Due to the low prevalence of early breast cancer in the population, the predictive value of a family history of breast cancer was 13% before the age of 70, 11% before the age of 50, and 1% before the age of 30." These numbers are much lower than most women would probably expect. As the authors explain, "Applying family history related criteria results in the screening of many women who will not develop breast cancer at an early age."

Given the psychological harm that screening visits can cause, more stringent criteria should be applied to early screening. The researchers recommend that these results be used to "reassure a large number of

women regarding their personal breast cancer risk."

Source: BioMed Central