

Rural women more likely to be diagnosed with most serious form of breast cancer

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Women living in rural areas face unique challenges concerning health and wellness issues. Now, an MU researcher has found that rural women are more likely than women living in cities to be diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer, the most severe form of the disease.

"The stage at which the cancer is diagnosed has a tremendous impact on the type of treatment, recovery and survivability," said Faustine Williams, a doctoral student in the Department of Rural Sociology in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. "Finding ways to identify and treat [breast cancer](#) sooner are keys to increasing survivability."

Williams found that [women](#) who travel 50 to 75 miles to a healthcare facility are 10 percent more likely to be diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer. She says women in [rural areas](#) are less likely to seek [preventative treatment](#) and testing due to the high cost and time necessary. Identifying breast cancer earlier increases survival rates.

Many states offer free [breast cancer screening](#) programs; however, programs can be improved to better serve women in rural areas. In Missouri, Williams recommends changes to the Show Me Healthy Women (SMHW) program, a free breast and [cervical cancer](#) screening program for Missourians. To receive a free screening, women must meet certain age, income and insurance guidelines. Although there are 180 facilities throughout the state, they are unevenly distributed. Several rural counties do not have a single facility. Williams recommends that

programs like SMHW make facilities more accessible to women in rural areas.

"In some cases women in rural areas must spend an entire day seeking routine medical treatment," Williams said. "By strategically placing health screening facilities in poor and rural areas, women would have better access to health care and it would increase the likelihood that rural women would seek medical care and be diagnosed with breast cancer earlier."

Williams analyzed data from the Missouri Information for Community Assessment in her study. She used mapping software to pinpoint the locations of patients diagnosed with each stage of breast cancer, as well as the nearest screening facility. Then, she calculated the distances from patients with each cancer stage to the nearest screening facilities.

In Missouri, eight of the top 10 counties for late-stage breast cancer incidences are considered rural counties by the United States Office of Management and Budget. Of the 55,182 female breast cancer cases reported in Missouri between 1996 and 2007, 17,093, or 31 percent, were diagnosed as late-stage cancer.

Williams presented her research at the Community Development Society and Rural Sociological Society Joint Annual Meetings in Boise, Idaho.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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