

False-positive mammogram result traumatic for most women, study finds

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Majority had issues such as anxiety, sleeplessness, often persisting long after being declared cancer-free.

(HealthDay)—In a finding that won't surprise many who've been through this ordeal, researchers say emotional turmoil is common for women whose mammogram falsely suggests they have breast cancer.

The Swedish study of nearly 400 such cases found that 88 percent of the [women](#) said they felt a sense of dejection, such as being uneasy, sad or unable to cope; 83 percent reported anxiety; 67 percent said they had [behavioral changes](#), such as trouble dealing with spare time or work; and 53 percent suffered sleeping problems.

One expert in the United States wasn't surprised.

"It is well known that false-positive results on a mammogram or ultrasound can cause anxiety and distress," said Dr. Stephanie Bernik,

chief of [surgical oncology](#) at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

Unfortunately, she added, women are in a tough spot because "at the current time, these tests are the best methods to detecting cancer at an earlier stage, when treatment can be less aggressive."

The study was led by Anetta Bolejko of Skane University Hospital in Malmo, Sweden. It included 399 Swedish women who had abnormal results on a [screening mammogram](#) but were found to be [breast cancer](#)-free after further tests. The women completed questionnaires about their mental health before they finally learned they did not have breast cancer, and then again six and 12 months later.

Compared to women who were told they did not have breast cancer after a screening mammogram, the women in the study were five times more likely to report mental distress before they learned they did not have breast cancer.

Even six and 12 months after receiving the good news, they were still twice as likely to be experiencing some mental strain compared to women who had not received a false-positive result, the authors said.

"The psychosocial consequences of false-positive screening mammograms are common and can persist over time," Bolejko said in a news release from the journal *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention*, which published the findings Aug. 26.

Bolejko believes that all "women invited to attend mammographic screening should be informed about the potential benefits and harm of the program, and the risk of long-term psychosocial consequences of false-positive screening mammography should be acknowledged."

Indeed, in 2009, the influential U.S. Preventive Services Task Force

cited unnecessary worry over false-positive results as one factor in its controversial decision to recommend against annual mammograms for women under 50.

But another U.S. expert stressed that the danger of false-positive results may be a necessary evil in the early detection of breast cancer.

"The overwhelming goal is to save lives through early detection," said Dr. Laurie Margolies, chief of breast imaging at the Dubin Breast Center, part of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, in New York City.

"This fact should not be lost and patients' care should not be compromised [by skipping mammograms] due to fear of inducing anxiety," she said.

Bernik agreed. "At the current time, mammography is still the best screening tool for breast cancer," she said. "With time, technology will hopefully provide a [screening](#) tool with less false-positives."

More information: The U.S. National Cancer Institute has more about [breast cancer screening](#).

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