



## Women Know Recent Recommendations on Mammograms, But Most Still Say Women Should Get Screened Earlier than Experts Advise

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WASHINGTON, D.C. More than half -- 54 percent -- of women think mammogram screenings should begin before the age of forty, in spite of recommendations by national health experts to the contrary, according to a new national survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University. Even among the 75 percent of women who know that the most recent recommendations by the National Cancer Institute advised mammograms every one or two years after the age of forty, three out of five (59%) favor regular screenings earlier. Only 4 percent of these women think regular screenings should begin at 50.

"After the recent flurry of recommendations by experts, one would expect women to be confused about mammogram screening. But, they're not. Instead, women have strong opinions about what they think women should do even if it flies in the face of the expert advice they are well aware of," said Felicia H. Stewart, M.D., Director of Reproductive Health Programs, Kaiser Family Foundation.

A sizeable percentage (27%) of women say they have been left *feeling* confused about when women should begin getting

mammograms as a result of the sometimes mixed advice of experts; although most (67%) say they have a clear understanding of what women should do, even if what they think runs counter to the opinions of the experts.

### **The Most Recent Recommendations:**

In December 1996, medical experts announced at the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America that women should start getting mammograms at age 40. In the following February, the National Institutes Health (NIH) reaffirmed its previous recommendation that women in their 50s should have annual screenings and said that women in their 40s should make up their own minds about mammograms. Most recently, in March, the National Cancer Institute (NCI), which is part of the NIH, recommended that women in their 40s get mammograms every one to two years. At that time, the NIH released a statement saying that it agreed with the NCI's recommendation.

Throughout the debate of the last five months over when regular mammograms should begin, women have followed the news media's coverage with close and growing interest. In December of last year, 62 percent of women said they had "closely" followed coverage of the National Radiological Society's recommendation, about the same percent as reported paying attention to news just two months later about the National Institutes of Health's recommendations on mammograms (65%). By April of this year, more than three-quarters of women (77%) said they were "closely" following the stories about the latest recommendations from the NCI on the subject. At these three distinct points in the debate, women reported following the news on mammograms more closely than most men.

As compared to other stories in the news during the same time period, the coverage generated by the NCI's recommendations about mammograms in April attracted greater interest from women than the Liggett Tobacco Company's admission that cigarettes are addictive (61%) or the debate over late-term abortions (56%).

These are some of the findings from the most recent

*Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index*, an ongoing effort to track the public's awareness and understanding of leading health stories in the news. The *Index* is provided every two months as a service to journalists to help inform their coverage of breaking health stories. This fifth report was based on a national random sample survey of 1,015 American adults (502 women and 508 men) ages 18 and older, and conducted between April 4 -8 by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of error is +/- 3%. Additional copies of this and previous issues of the Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index beginning in August 1996 are available through the Foundation's publications request line at 1-800-656-4KFF.

### **Beyond Age, Other Factors for Mammography:**

In addition to age, which has been the focus of attention, experts identify a number of other risk factors that women and their doctors should keep in mind as they consider when to begin mammography. Risk is higher for:

- Women who have a mother or sister with breast cancer history, especially if it occurred before menopause or affected both breasts;
- Women who have large breasts that are difficult to examine;
- Women who have had a breast biopsy that found specific patterns associated with higher risk for future cancer (proliferative disease, atypical hyperplasia, or lobular in situ carcinoma);
- Women who have never had a full-term pregnancy, or had a first pregnancy after the age of 25.
- Women who began their menstrual cycles before the age of 12, or had menopause later than the age of 55.

Source: Bilimoria MM Morrow M. The Woman at Increased Risk for Breast Cancer: Evaluation and Management Strategies. CA Cancer J Clin 1995;45:263-278.

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The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a non-profit, independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. The Foundation's work is focused on four main areas: health policy, reproductive health, HIV, and health and development in South Africa.