



Breast Cancer & Elders

Q: Is breast cancer just a disease of younger women?

A: No. Breast cancer is actually more common in older women. 50% of all new breast cancers occur in women age 65 and older, and 22% in women age 75 or older. The estimated risk of new breast cancer is 1 in 14 for women aged 60 to 79 compared to 1 in 228 women aged 39 and younger. 35% of women are over the age of 70 at the time of invasive breast cancer diagnosis. Currently, the median age of breast cancer diagnosis in the United States is 62. As our population ages, women over the age of 65 will become the most prevalent breast cancer patient.

The American Cancer Society recommends a woman should continue to receive a mammogram as long as she is in reasonably good health and would be a candidate for treatment. There is no specific age "cut-off" for screening benefits, and all women over 40 are urged to have an annual mammogram. Yet 13 million U.S. women 40 years of age or older have never had a mammogram.

It's estimated that 65% of women over the age of 65 had mammography within the past year. Studies in the past have shown that older women under-utilize mammography. Women over the age of 70 are still underrepresented in screening populations, and are a group for whom considerable impact might still be made. One study showed that annual mammography in women 50 to 74 years of age reduced breast-cancer related mortality by approximately 26% within 7 to 9 years of screening.

Older women with breast cancer are more likely to die than younger women with the disease, a study last year concluded. Patients aged 70 to 84 years had up to a 13% lower chance of surviving breast cancer than those aged 50 to 69 years. The study found that breast cancer diagnosis was often made later in older women and, once diagnosed, they were less likely to be fully investigated for their cancer and had less aggressive treatment than younger women. Older women were less likely to have had their cancer detected by mammography screening. As one doctor at the American Cancer Society says, "If an older patient has health problems that keep her from being a candidate for breast cancer treatment, then mammography may not have great value to her. However, if an elderly patient is otherwise in good health, then breast cancer could be easily detected with a mammography and treated."

If you'd like to use the internet to help a low-income woman get a free mammogram, go to the Breast Cancer Site, www.thebreastcancersite.com, and "click" on the pink "fund free mammograms" box. This site has given more than 16,000 free mammograms to women in need-including more than 1,500 screenings at Mass General in Boston. The funding generated by your clicks is paid for by site sponsors whose ads appear after you click. In 2006, visitors clicked 71,637,443 times, and funded 2,612 mammograms.