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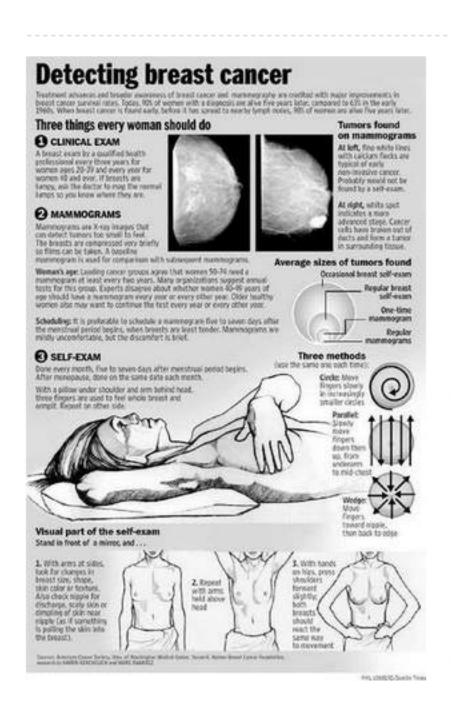
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# Straight talk about mammograms, self-exams

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Breast cancer is the most common tumor found in American women, after skin cancer. But controversy about the methods to find breast cancer and whether all women should get annual mammograms and perform breast exams on themselves erupted in 2009 and continues today.

The dustup began over recommendations by an independent federal task force that said mammography can lead to too many unnecessary tests and treatments.

The following are some questions and answers to help you sort through the issues.

QUESTION: So there isn't clear agreement among national health agencies and organizations that women should get annual mammograms to find breast cancer?

BY PATRICIA ANSTETT **DETROIT FREE PRESS** MEDICAL WRITER

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ANSWER: That's correct. There isn't. Leading groups and the federal government have different recommendations. They agree on one thing: Women ages 50 to 74 need a mammogram at least every two years.

The American Cancer Society and others recommend mammograms every year; a federal advisory task force says women 50 and older should have them every two years.

# Q: Why don't they agree?

**A:** It boils down to a disagreement over the value of mammograms. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, an independent federal

> advisory group of medical experts, says there's not enough proof that mammograms save lives in younger women because they may suggest that cancer is there when it is not, leading to unnecessary biopsies and surgery.

Organizations that recommend annual mammograms say the tests are among the reasons breast cancer deaths have declined 30% since 1990. Other factors contributing to fewer breast cancer deaths include broader awareness, which has led to quicker reporting of problems to doctors, as well as better treatments that help women survive the disease.

# Q: What about other women? Should they get a mammogram?

The task force says the decision to have a mammogram before age 50 is a woman's personal choice. It also does not recommend them for women 75 and older. Other groups and breast-radiology specialists don't draw the line at age 75. Dr. Mark Segel, a leading metro Detroit mammography expert at Henry Ford Macomb Hospital in Clinton Township, recommends mammograms every two years



Mark Segel

#### Screening info

For information about breast cancer detection and screening, go to:

- U.S. Prevention Services Task Force: www.uspreventive services taskforce.org/uspstf /uspsbrca.htm
- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org

 American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: www.acog.org have a longer life expectancy.

### Q: What kind of mammogram is bestdigital or film-screen?

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A: Digital is best for women under the age of 50 as well as for women getting a mammogram for the first time. Studies show that digital tests are more accurate finding cancer in women with thicker or dense breasts, which is more common before menopause or in women who use hormone replacement therapy. Older women who have had the traditional film-screen tests for years still can get those tests.

However, Segel says that within five years, most film-screen mammogram machines will be obsolete. Women also need the exact same type of test, year-to-year, so doctors reading the tests have similar mammograms for comparison.

#### Q: There's controversy about breast self-exams, too?

A: Yes, for similar reasons. The task force says breast self-exams also lead too many women to get unnecessary biopsies and surgery. Others like the cancer society say self-exams play a small role in breast cancer detection, but have value because they get women looking for suspicious areas.

#### Q: Are there other ways to find breast cancer?

A: There are, but most are not federally approved or are a complement to mammography, not a replacement. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) tests may help find cancer in women with a family history of breast cancer, studies have shown. Another test, breast-specific gamma imaging, or molecular breast imaging, uses a high-resolution camera that picks up hot spots of cancer when women get a small injection of radioactive material that picks up the higher metabolic activity in cancer cells. In metro Detroit, Beaumont Hospital Troy and Regional Medical Imaging in Flint offer breast-specific gamma imaging; MRI is widely available. Either test might not be covered by health insurance.

# Q: Many women avoid mammograms because they fear breast cancer will be found. What else do they need to know?

A: Usually, cancer is NOT found. Of 100 women who get a mammogram and who are called back for more tests, 24 will need a biopsy, which today almost always is done with a needle, not surgery, at least initially. Of the 24 getting biopsies, six will have breast cancer, Segel says. The survival rate for women with early-stage breast cancer is 95% five years later.

#### Q: I can't afford a mammogram. Is there any help available?

A: If you are uninsured or underinsured, ask a mammography center if it offers a discounted price. Many do. Also, Michigan offers free mammograms and Pap smears to uninsured women ages 40-60.

For details, call 888-242-2702 or go to www.michigancancer.org/bcccp.