

MAMMOGRAMS SAVE LIVES

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I feel that most Hoosier women over the age of 40 know they should get an annual mammogram, but according to the American Cancer Society (ACS) only 62 percent of these women are getting annual mammograms. In May, at the age of 40 I received the news that my mammogram was abnormal. I have had annual mammograms since I was in my 30's, due to some past breast issues and my family history of breast cancer. The cancer that I had was one that could not be felt due to its small size, it was only .7 mm in size. However, it was discovered due to the radiologist seeing microcalcifications, which are sometimes seen when there is a malignancy, or cancer on my mammogram. This article is meant to be a plea to those in the 38 percentile who are not getting annual mammograms, and also a challenge to everyone reading this to seek out their loved ones who are in that 38 percentile and encourage them to get their mammogram.

Women who find their breast cancer in the early stage have a 98 percent 5 year survival rate, according to the ACS. What can you do to increase your odds of finding breast cancer at an early stage? Women 40 and older should have a mammogram every year. Women in their 20s and 30s should have a clinical breast exam by your health care provider every 3 years. After age 40, this exam should take place every year. Women should know how their breasts normally feel and report any breast change to their health care provider promptly. Monthly breast self exams should begin when you are 20.

What should I report to my health care provider? A new lump or mass, but do not panic if you have a new lump or mass because most breast lumps are benign or non-cancerous. However, you need to have any new lumps or masses examined by your health care provider. Other physical signs include a generalized swelling of part of a breast, even if you cannot feel a lump, skin irritation or dimpling of the skin, nipple pain or retraction of the nipple, where the nipple turns inward, redness or scaliness of the nipple or breast skin, or a spontaneous discharge from the nipple, other than breast milk.

What increases my risk of breast cancer? Gender, being a woman is the greatest risk factor, however, men can also develop breast cancer. Age, one half of all breast cancers are diagnosed in women older than 61. Family history of breast cancer of a first-degree relative, which is a mother, sister or daughter. If the relative had cancer in both breasts or before age 40, the risk is even higher. Genetic tests are now available, the BRCA1 and BRCA2, which show if you are in the 5% of women who inherited mutations to your BRCA1 or 2 genes. Other risk factors include, postmenopausal hormone therapy, especially combined estrogen and progesterone therapy, being overweight or obese, with weight gain being of extra concern after menopause, use of alcohol, especially one of more drinks daily, physical inactivity, long menstrual history, never having children or having your first live birth after age 30 and previous chest radiation to treat a different cancer.

What can I do to decrease my risk of breast cancer? Reduce alcohol use, breast feed your children, engage in regular physical activity, maintain a healthy weight, and eat a healthy, well balanced diet with at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

The ACS website was used when researching this article, www.cancer.org.