

## The Debate on Mammograms

In November, millions of American women were stunned, upset or even angered by U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) guidelines recommending against mammograms for women in their 40s. To Sonia McKeen, 44, who was scheduled for her annual mammogram later that month, postponing it until she was 50 didn't sound safe, even though her previous breast X-rays were normal.

The Locust Grove, Ga., district manager of a cosmetics company went ahead with the test, which detected breast cancer. "It was like being hit in the face with a brick wall," says McKeen. "I never dreamed this could happen to me, because I have no family history. What made it even more shocking was that my doctor had checked my breasts that morning and didn't feel anything because the lump was so small."

Physicians discovered that the disease had already spread to her lymph nodes. "Although it's aggressive breast cancer, I have a very good prognosis," adds McKeen, who underwent a double mastectomy to reduce the risk of recurrence, with immediate reconstruction. She's now being treated with chemotherapy. "But I get livid, thinking about what might have happened if I'd waited."

### A Fiery Debate

The guidelines, which also call for screening every two years after 50 and discourages doctors from teaching women to do self-exams, have ignited a still smoldering debate, says Sharon Rosenbaum Smith, M.D., a breast surgeon at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in New York City. "It's a huge controversy and patients are very confused. Every day, women

in their 40s ask me, 'Do I still need mammograms?'"

It's no wonder that women worry about the best way

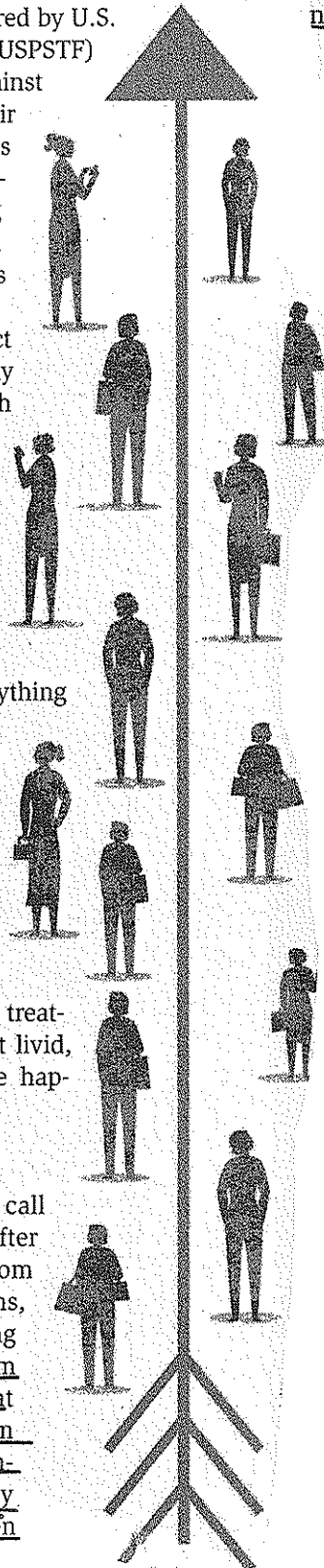
to protect their health, given conflicting guidelines from other respected groups, such as the American Cancer Society, which advises yearly mammograms starting at age 40. Upping anxiety is the threat that breast cancer poses: Over a lifetime, a woman has a one in eight risk of developing the disease, which strikes about 192,000 American women a year and kills 40,000. Twenty-three percent of cases occur in women under 50.

### Catching It Early

What are the pluses and minuses of starting screening at 40? "Early detection saves almost as many lives of women in their 40s as it does women in their 50s," says Dr. Rosenbaum Smith. For both age groups, screening cut breast cancer mortality by about 15 percent, an Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)-funded evidence review found. The review pooled the results of mammography studies involving 600,830 women of various ages.

Advantages of catching cancer early also include less grueling treatment, such as a breast-conserving lumpectomy, instead of a mastectomy and lymph node removal, adds Dr. Rosenbaum Smith. "Also, if we find breast cancer when it's still microscopic and hasn't spread, the woman may not need chemotherapy."

However, since the disease is less likely to strike younger women, they don't gain as much from mammography as their older sisters do. To prevent one breast cancer death, 1,904 women in their 40s must be screened, compared with 1,339 women in their 50s, and 377 in their 60s, the AHRQ review reported.



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## Downside of Mammograms

"Women in their 40s have denser breast tissue compared to older women, which can limit the usefulness of mammogram," says Nicholas Robert, M.D., associate chair of the breast cancer committee at US Oncology, an integrated oncology services company in The Woodlands, Tx., that unites a network of more than 1,300 cancer doctors throughout the United States. "However," he says, "a new technology — digital mammography — has been developed and, from a major large study, shown to

be more effective than film mammography. Digital mammography should be the standard for evaluating women with dense breasts."

This was one of the reasons why the USPSTF recommended against screening before age 50, Dr. Robert explains. "Another rising issue is the potential risks of radiation exposure from breast X-rays, but today mammography is done very safely and the equipment is monitored carefully." Digital mammograms are now the standard of care, he adds. "Many studies show they work better than film X-rays, particularly for women with dense breasts."

## Making a Smart Decision

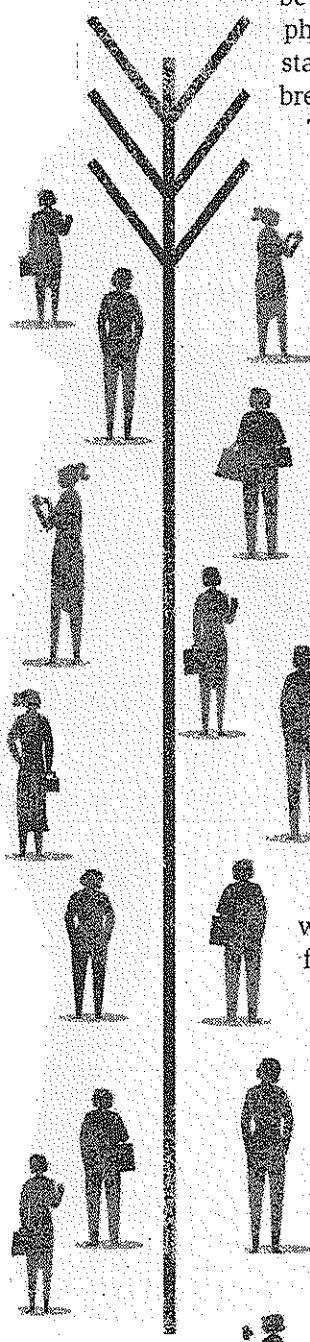
Given the dueling mammogram guidelines, the best way to sift through the confusion and controversy is to discuss the pros and cons with your health care provider, says Dr. Rosenbaum Smith. Also, talk about your risk factors. A common misconception is that the disease is mainly triggered by faulty genes.

Actually, 70 to 80 percent of women who develop breast cancer have no family history.

Other factors that can boost the danger include dense breasts, obesity, a couch potato lifestyle and not having kids or giving birth for the first time after age 30. Women who have had more menstrual cycles — either because their period started before age 12 or stopped after age 55 — have a slightly elevated risk. This may be linked to higher lifetime exposure to the hormones estrogen and progesterone. Risk also rises with age.

Both doctors advise starting screening at 40. "It's not mandatory if someone is reluctant, but when my wife was in her 40s, I recommended that she have mammograms either annually or every other year," says Dr. Robert. "Now that she's in her 50s, she gets them every year. Although there's less breast cancer in women in their 40s, catching it early gives women a better chance of survival."

— L.C.C.



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