



Sue Ann Says: It's Vital to Continue Getting Regular Mammograms

I dashed into the doctor's office without a care in the world. I hadn't been very good about doing regular breast self-exams, but so what? I felt healthy as an ox; what could possibly be wrong?

I walked out of that office a statistic: yet one more woman diagnosed with breast cancer. But because the mammogram found the cancer in its earliest, most treatable stage, I now represent another statistic: one among the growing numbers of breast cancer survivors.

Early detection saved my life – and that of my daughter. That's why I was so alarmed by a recent National Cancer Institute study that showed the rate of mammography is dropping. This trend reverses huge increases in mammography rates since the 1980s. In 1987, only 39 percent of women over age 40 had mammograms. In 2000, 70 percent had regular mammograms. But by 2005, mammography rates for women overall had dropped to about 66 percent. And mammography rates among women ages 50 to 64 – the age group with the largest number of breast cancer cases – dropped nearly seven percent. The drop in mammography is highest among women who have traditionally used mammography at higher rates in the past: non-Hispanic white women in their 50s and 60s, with higher incomes and better education.

Researchers say the increase in mammography is directly tied to the reduced death rates from breast cancer. So a drop in mammography means more cancers diagnosed at later stages. It means more women undergoing more aggressive cancer treatments. It means more women will die – women who would have survived had their cancer been found earlier.

When early detection is a proven life saver, why aren't women absolutely vigilant about having regular mammograms? Researchers aren't sure. It could be financial reasons or poor access to mammography. Fewer women are using hormone replacement therapy, which may give them a false sense of security regarding their breast cancer risk. It's possible that women are no longer convinced that mammograms are effective. Many women avoid mammography because they fear it will be painful. It might be that because the breast cancer death rate has dropped, women just aren't as worried about breast cancer anymore.

Here's the message we need to get across to all women: Breast cancer is a very real threat. Is still the second leading cause of cancer death in women. Breast cancer is curable. But it needs to be caught early, when it is most treatable. And regular mammography is essential to detect early stage cancer. Physicians generally recommend regular mammograms beginning at age 40. This is why monthly breast self-examination – no matter what our age – is also vital. Deanna Favre, Brett Favre's wife, was only 35 when she found a lump in her breast through breast self-exam. Had she not been so conscientious, the outcome of her cancer may have been very different.

Take responsibility and be proactive for your health:

- Know your cancer risks and research your family health history. If you have at least two “first-degree” relatives (a parent, sibling or child) who have been diagnosed with cancer before the age of 50, or if you have other risk factors, ask your doctor about early screening options or even a referral to an oncology specialist.
- Perform breast self-exams monthly so you can easily detect any differences in how your breasts feel and look.
- Have a regular mammogram. Do it for yourself. Do it for those you love.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

