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## Missed Opportunities for Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening in Older Women

Breast and cervical cancers are a serious health threat to older women. Women 65 years of age and older have a six times greater risk of developing breast cancer and a seven times greater chance of dying from breast cancer compared to younger women. Women 65 years of age and older are two times more likely to be diagnosed and four times more likely to die of cervical cancer compared to younger women.

The increased risk among older women developing and dying from breast or cervical cancer illustrates the importance of providing cancer screening to older women.

Unfortunately, Papanicolaou (Pap) test and mammography utilization rates are lower in this group compared with younger women.

### Mammography

Despite a significant reduction in breast cancer mortality afforded by annual screening by mammography in women aged 50-70 years, the percentage of women who report either ever having had a mammogram or having had a mammogram in the past year decreases with age. Among reasons for low screening rates in older women are:

- Misunderstanding of the risk of developing breast cancer
- Lack of knowledge of how often to be screened
- Inability to pay for screening
- Fear
- Lack of recommendation by a health care provider

Physicians are important in increasing use of mammography. In the 1992 Mammography Attitudes and Usage Study, 76% of the women surveyed cited a physician recommendation as the primary reason they had a mammogram. Women over 70 years of age were more likely than younger women to say that their physician did not recommend mammography.

Several studies have associated the specialty of a physician with whether a patient was referred for mammography screening. Obstetrician/gynecologists were more likely to refer their patients for screening mammography compared with other specialties.

### Screening for Cervical Cancer

The Pap test has been credited with the dramatic decline in cervical cancer mortality rates during the past four decades. As with mammography, the probability of a woman either ever having been screened or having regular screening decreases as age increases. Barriers to Pap test screening in older women include:

- Lack of awareness of the recommendation to screen for cervical cancer past child-bearing years
- Not having symptoms
- Fear and embarrassment
- Lack of recommendation by a health care provider

Women of any age who regularly visit an obstetrician/gynecologist were more likely to have had a recent Pap test compared to women who saw a different type of physician. Relatively few older women and low income women receive care from an obstetrician/gynecologist on a regular basis.

### Recommendations for Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening:

- Annual clinical breast exam from age 40
- Screening mammography yearly from the age of 50 years
- Annual pelvic examination with Pap test for all women 18 years of age or who are sexually active, regardless of age.

### Conclusion

Once women are past reproductive age, they are less likely to be seen by provider groups focused on gynecologic needs and are less likely to obtain preventive services for breast and cervical cancer. It is important that all primary providers screen and provide preventive education on breast and cervical cancer. Older women should receive these potentially life-saving services.

### References:

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