
CJOC's Mammogram Screening Recommendations

In a controversial announcement, the Preventative Services Task Force (USPSTF) has significantly changed its recommendation for breast cancer screening. The Task Force now recommends screening mammograms, for average risk women, begin at age 50 and be performed every other year. The USPSTF is not a branch of government, but is a small group of scientists commissioned by the government to study the data. There are no medical oncologists or radiologists on the Task Force. At this time, the USPSTF is the only organization making this recommendation. Major groups including the American Cancer Society, and The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists are standing by the gold standard of mammograms every 1-2 years starting at 40, and yearly after 50. Medicare and other insurers have indicated they will continue insurance coverage as before. It should be noted again that the new recommendations apply only to patients at average risk. Women at higher than average risk might include those with a personal history of breast cancer or other cancers, and a family history of breast cancer.

At this time CJOC will stand by the age 40 standard. We believe strongly in early detection and are particularly concerned that cancers in younger women may be more aggressive. Mammographies have saved hundreds of lives of women under the age of 50. However, it is reasonable for women to talk with their physicians about their individual risk. The balance between the benefit of detecting breast cancer early may be weighed against the risk of radiation exposure, possibly unnecessary surgery and the anxiety that can come from false positives. However, as most curable breast cancers are detected by mammography, we would be very hesitant to delay early detection. Certainly, for many patients of our practice, there is a need for significantly more frequent testing and at times for more complex imaging, such as MRI.

The USPSTF also brought into question the benefit of breast self-exams. While the data in this area has always been unclear, we believe that if nothing else, breast self-exams raise health awareness and in this way certainly saves lives. In addition, women should have a professional breast exam at least once a year.

If you have any questions regarding these new recommendations, particularly as it applies to you, do not hesitate to contact your physician or nurse practitioner at CJOC.