

Study: Half of women with insurance skip annual mammograms

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By [Misti Crane](#)

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About half of women whose insurance pays for mammograms actually go in every year for a screening, according to research released this morning.

A study of 1.6 million women who are customers of Medco Health Solutions found that on average, about 50 percent of women in the plan got an annual mammogram. Numbers were highest for those 50 to 64 years old, but still low at an average of 54 percent.

When researcher Dr. Milayna Subar looked at patterns over the four-year study period, she found that about 60 percent of women had two mammograms in four years.

The research was presented at the annual San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium and bolsters previous studies showing that many women skip exams.

Subar, vice president and national practice leader for oncology at the insurance company, said she found it particularly interesting in light of the furor following the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force's suggestion last year that mammograms start at age 50 and not be done every year.

"It sounded to me like the 40 to 50 age group seemed the loudest in terms of 'Don't take away my right,' " she said.

But in her study, 47 percent of women 40 to 49 years old had an annual mammogram.

The task force's controversial recommendations and similar guidelines from other organizations have generally been ignored as insurers continue to pay for annual mammograms and most doctors continue to recommend them.

The American Cancer Society continues to advocate for annual mammograms starting at 40.

But doctors who work in mammography know that even when financial barriers are erased, annual scans are a tough sell for some women.

"We haven't seen great compliance as far as following the exact year-to-year mammograms," said Dr. Adele Lipari, chief of breast imaging at Ohio State University Medical Center.

"I think what we're going to have to do is just get to women and have them understand what a lifesaver it can be."

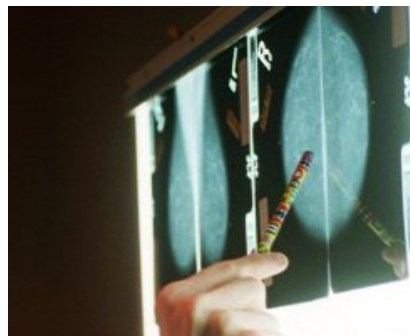
Dr. Mary Pat Borgess, a radiologist at Riverside Methodist Hospital who specializes in breast cancer, also wasn't particularly surprised by the study.

The problem is likely worse in rural areas where mammography centers aren't as plentiful, she said, but some of the obstacles exist regardless of access.

Rarely does a woman have more than minor discomfort, but some women avoid mammograms because they fear pain, she said.

Others - including Borgess' mother - put off screening because of denial.

"She kept saying, 'I don't know if I want to find out if anything is wrong,' " Borgess said.



File

Money, even for those who are insured, can be a problem as well. Since the recession hit, more women have been skipping routine mammograms because they say they can't afford their co-pays, she said.

For those women who experience more discomfort during mammography, backing off caffeine for a few days before will help, as will taking some pain relief, such as ibuprofen, before the appointment, Lipari said.

Subar said she did not want to comment on which of the varying recommendations for mammography is best.

"But I do think that all of the guidelines agree that at least every two years is recommended and we should certainly at least be able to get that done," she said.

Subar said the study should prompt doctors and interest groups to keep talking about the importance of mammography, especially in at-risk women. Her company has a new program that will identify at-risk women and send them a reminder when it's time to have a mammogram.

"Even though we all think about it, maybe it's not often enough. Sometimes getting nudged a little bit can help," Subar said.



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