

**Issue: New Breast Cancer Screening Recommendations**

**Position: St. Luke's recommends that women undergo annual screening mammography beginning at age 40 in accordance with established guidelines such as the American Cancer Society.**

**Framing the Issue**

For nearly 40 years, St. Luke's has been a pioneer in breast cancer screening. In 1973, St. Luke's Mountain States Tumor Institute (MSTI) opened its first Breast Cancer Detection Center as part of a national clinical trial funded by the National Cancer Institute.

That trial and many subsequent studies have found that screening mammography beginning at age 40 has helped detect cancer early and is the major factor in improving the breast cancer mortality rate.

Despite substantial evidence to the contrary, a report released in November 2009 from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force suggests there should be a major change in the current recommended screening guidelines.

The task force now recommends:

- Screening should begin at 50 and continue every two years until age 74.
- Because there is not enough evidence upon which they can base a recommendation, there is no recommendation for women 75 and over.
- There is not enough outcome evidence to recommend a clinical breast examination (a careful breast exam done periodically by a trained medical professional) for women 40 years of age or older.

## *Breast Cancer Screening (cont'd)*

- Women should no longer perform self-examinations because there isn't enough evidence to prove the effectiveness.

The new guidelines are a dramatic shift from the long established recommendations. Even though there appears to be very little support to follow the new guidelines, the suggested changes do have the potential to confuse women and health care professionals who now must make a choice as to which recommendations to follow.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendations are not binding but are often consulted by medical professionals and by third-party public and private medical insurers. Interestingly, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius has stated that this new recommendation is not the policy of the Federal Government. She advised women to continue screening under the established guidelines with women beginning annual screening at age 40.

Many leading breast cancer experts have criticized the new recommendations for overstating the risks of screening mammography and understating the benefits. The task force cites risks including anxiety and unnecessary disfiguring procedures as the result of mammography. Certainly, anxiety occurs during the process of evaluating a breast problem, but for the vast majority of women this is outweighed by the desire to be proactive about their healthcare. Additionally, with current needle biopsy techniques, it is very rare that a patient would undergo a surgical biopsy to diagnose a breast abnormality identified on a mammogram. Needle biopsies are very accurate and do not cause disfigurement of the breast.

The task force has also been heavily criticized for understating the benefit of screening mammography by including data from flawed studies and not including compelling data from several well designed and conducted trials. The fact that no radiologists, breast surgeons or oncologists were included in creating this guideline has also called into question the validity of this recommendation. These specialists are the physicians most expert in the diagnosis and treatment of patients with breast cancer. To exclude these experts omits a wealth of knowledge and experience in caring for patients with breast disease.

## **St. Luke's Position & Practices**

St. Luke's continues to recommend that women begin annual screenings for breast cancer at age 40 and continue self examinations and clinical breast exams.

Numerous clinical trials have shown that annual screening mammography beginning at age 40 reduces mortality from breast cancer by at least 30 percent. In fact, some of the most recent clinical trials from Sweden demonstrated a 44% reduction in mortality in the 40-49 age group. Additionally, digital mammography has been shown to have a 24% greater detection rate in younger women than was found with older analog mammograms.

St. Luke's is following the lead of many organizations including the American Cancer Society and Susan G. Komen Foundation for the Cure which continue to recommend annual screening starting at 40.

St. Luke's is aware that mammography has limitations. Some women who are screened will have false alarms and some cancers will be missed. However, it is clear from decades of research that annual screening mammography significantly reduces mortality from breast cancer and that the benefits far outweigh the risks. Choosing to have screening mammograms empowers women to take a positive step to a healthy life.

The biggest limitation to screening is that not enough women take advantage of it either from lack of knowledge or lack of resources. St. Luke's remains committed to educating women about the benefits of annual screening and is seeking out every opportunity to provide financial support for those who cannot afford screening.