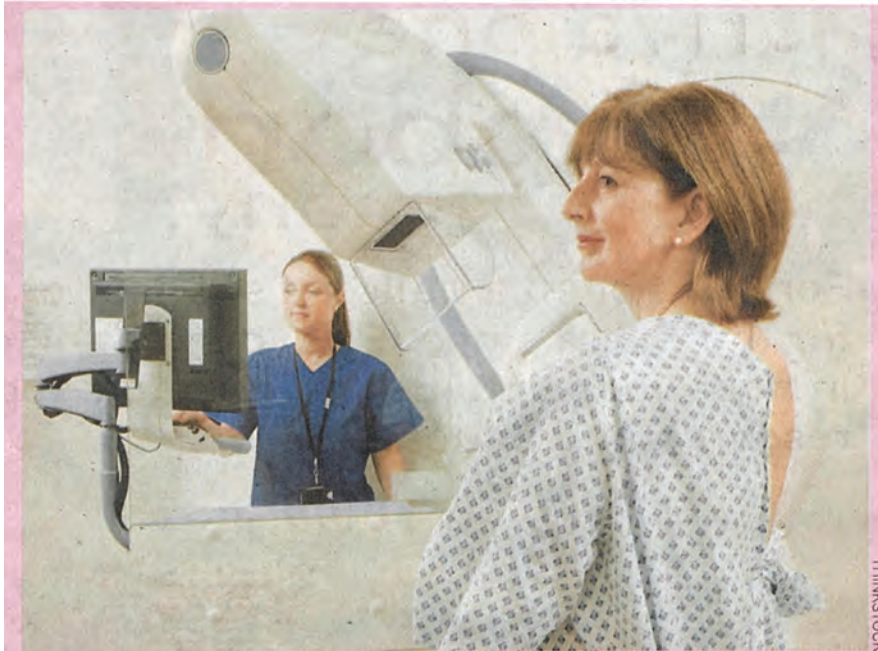


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Local health-care providers say women should begin annual mammograms at age 40, contrary to a report by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, which says women should begin them at age 50.

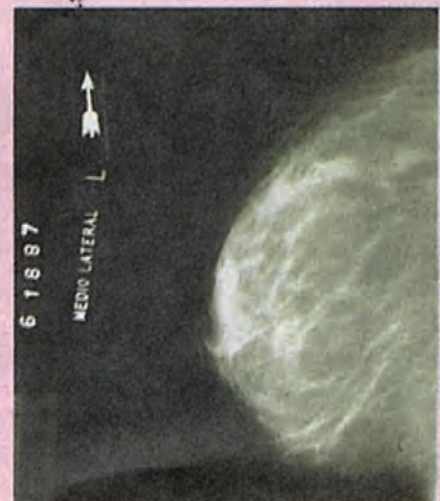
NO DEBATE

In spite of a government panel's recommendation, experts agree on when to get a mammogram

■ DEBRA GELBART

At what age should you get a mammogram? At 40? 50? You may have heard conflicting advice. Your family practice doctor may have told you age 50, based on the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendations issued last fall. Yet you may have read online that Susan G. Komen for the Cure and the American Cancer Society both urge women to begin getting annual mammograms at age 40.

"I'm very concerned that a recent survey of family practice physicians found that 60 percent of them have changed what they tell patients about mammograms, based on the Task Force recommendations," said Lori Kunzelman, M.D., a radiologist with Scottsdale Medical Imaging, Ltd. Although major medical organizations continue to emphasize age 40 for first mammograms, "we've seen a decline in the number of women coming in for mammograms since the Task Force released its recommendations."



Mammography uses low-dose radiation, and it is a very safe first step in detecting breast cancer.

A sampling of organizations that recommend women begin getting mammograms at age 40:

- Susan G. Komen for the Cure
- Banner M.D. Anderson Cancer Center
- The Breast Health Center at Phoenix Baptist Hospital
- Scottsdale Medical Imaging, Ltd.
- American Cancer Society
- American Society of Breast Surgeons
- John C. Lincoln Breast Health and Research Center

FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, which partners with Banner Health in Arizona, also recommends annual mammograms for women beginning at age 40. "Most women diagnosed with breast cancer in their 40s do not have risk factors, says Therese Bevers, M.D., director of the Cancer Prevention Center at M.D. Anderson. "Some have suggested it is even more important to do annual mammography screening with women in this age group, since these women tend to have more aggressive forms of breast cancer."

Kunzelman said at Scottsdale Medical Imaging, 20 percent of women who are diagnosed with breast cancer each year are under age 50. That translates to as many as 60 younger women being diagnosed every year at just one local facility.

At Phoenix Baptist Hospital's Breast Health Center, fewer women have been

coming in for mammograms since the Task Force issued its report.

"Some women are getting a false sense of security from the Task Force," said Gail Morris-Breit, the lead mammographer at Phoenix Baptist. She noted that on the day the Task Force issued its report, three patients under 50 were diagnosed with breast cancer at her facility. "Now, with the 'swoop of a pen' the Task Force has taken us back years and years," she said.

TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

When radiologists, cancer specialists, mammographers and others disagree so adamantly with the Task Force recommendations, how can patients decide what's best for them? Most health professionals will tell women to talk to their doctors, and to look at recommendations in the aggregate from major medical organizations. "Unfortunately, the Task Force's recommendations are completely against everything we've known to be true for decades," Kunzelman said.

"The Task Force has overemphasized the harms of screening," Bevers said, "especially the false positive, and may not have the individual patient in mind. While we recognize there are false positives, we feel this is an acceptable trade-off to ensure fewer women die from the disease.



M.D. ANDERSON CANCER CENTER

Who's right? Women should talk to their doctors and look at recommendations from major medical organizations.