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Women Should Be Screened for Breast Cancer 10 Years Earlier, Guidelines Say

New guidance calls for mammograms every other year, while some doctors urge annual checks

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Women as young as 40 should get checked for breast cancer every two years, a government-backed panel of experts recommended, lowering the starting age by a decade but stopping short of the annual screening some doctors recommend.

Women 40 to 74 should get screened every other year, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force said on Tuesday. It previously recommended that screening every other year start at 50 and that women in their 40s decide when to start screening in consultation with doctors. The task force said its draft guidance for women at average risk could save about 20% more lives than its previous recommendation and could help address the higher rates of breast-cancer deaths for Black women.

“Women in their 40s are developing breast cancer more than ever before,” said John Wong, a member of the task force and chief of the division of clinical decision making at Tufts Medical Center. “Screening women starting at age 40 can reduce their chances of dying from breast cancer.”

The draft guidance revives a debate about when and how often to screen for breast cancer, as the task force and doctors balance the advantages of frequent screening with potential risks such as false positives. Some breast-cancer doctors and medical groups said mammograms should be annual, and insurers are required to cover them. The American Cancer Society recommends women get annual screens between 45 and 54, after which they can decide to switch to every other year.

The influential task force's new recommendation, which will be open for public comment through June 5, could lead more doctors and patients to embrace mammograms starting at 40. Some doctors and medical organizations wanted the guidance to go further.

"I'm glad that the task force has come around on thinking that women should start screening at 40," said Dr. Debra Monticciolo, division chief of Breast Imaging at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. "We really were disappointed that they did not recommend annual screening."

Breast cancer is the No. 2 cause of women's cancer death in the U.S., after lung cancer, according to the American Cancer Society. It is most frequently diagnosed among women between 65 and 74 years old, but incidence has increased for women 40 to 49 years old about 2% a year from 2015 to 2019, the task force said.

Mammograms can help doctors find cancers early, but medical groups have released conflicting guidance on when and how often women should get scanned. The previous guidance from the task force, 16 volunteer preventive-medicine and primary-care experts, was among the most conservative.

Starting mammograms at 40 is a particularly important step for Black women because they often develop aggressive cancers at young ages, the task force said. Black women are 40% more likely to die of breast cancer than white women despite similar screening rates. The task force called for more research on the causes and ways to reduce the disparity.

The task force said there wasn't enough evidence on screening women 75 and older, or to recommend whether women with dense breast tissue should get additional screening with an ultrasound or MRI. Women over 75 should decide with their doctor whether to continue screening, the group said.

Nearly half of women have dense breasts, which increases the risk for breast cancer and makes mammograms harder to read. The Food and Drug Administration in March said it would require mammography centers to tell women if they have dense breast tissue by later next year.