

Why the Drop in Mammograms?

National Cancer Institute researchers want to know why fewer women are getting mammograms.

By Benjamin Gleisser

Healthcare workers can't understand it. Breast cancer advocates are also at a loss to explain the disturbing statistic: Fewer women are getting mammograms. Researchers fear that if this trend continues, we may see an increase in breast cancer in the future.

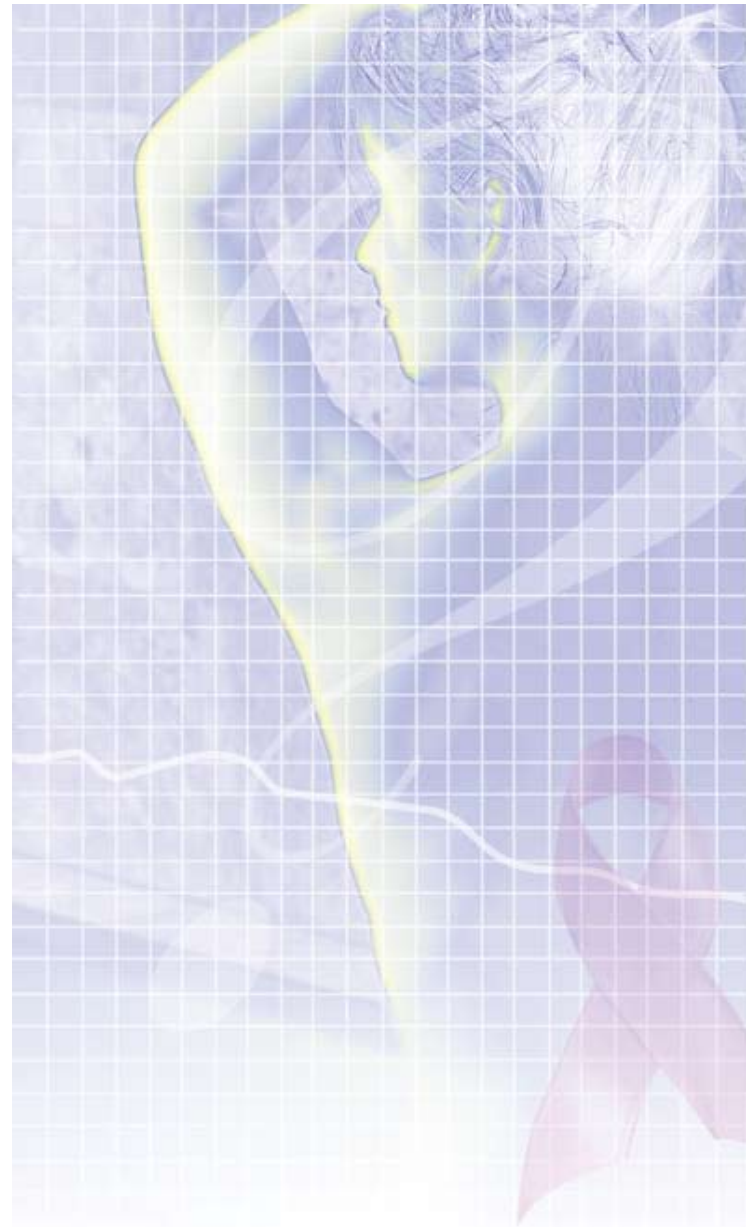
In 2000, 70 percent of U.S. women 40 and older reported having received a mammogram in the past two years. But by 2005, that number had shrunk to 66 percent, according to a National Cancer Institute study published in the June 2007 issue of *Cancer*. Most surprisingly, the study found that nearly 7 percent fewer 50- to 64-year-old women sought mammograms; that's particularly alarming to researchers because women in this age group are most likely to benefit from breast cancer screenings.

"The findings were striking and surprising," says Nancy Breen, Ph.D., an economist with the National Cancer Institute and first author of the study. "These are higher-income women with access to health insurance and mammograms, yet they're not going for the tests."

Breen and her fellow scientists are now conducting a new study, scheduled for release in 2008: "The Drop in Mammography: Is This Cause for Concern?"

While the reasons behind the decrease are not yet clear, Breen and others speculate about factors that might be having a detrimental influence on screening rates:

- *Fewer radiologists mean longer waits.* A shortage of radiologists may mean busy women are getting mammograms every two to three years instead of yearly as recommended by the American Cancer Society.
- *Cautious radiologists.* Radiologists are often hesitant to administer mammograms because of low reimbursement and fears of lawsuits from a false negative test (where the screening fails to reveal an existing tumor).
- *False sense of security.* Fewer women are getting hormone replacement therapy, which has been linked to breast cancer. Women who don't use hormones may feel they're not a breast cancer risk.
- *More women are seeking thermography.* Concerns about mammography, which uses radiation to image the breast, are compelling some women to try thermography, a newer screening method that uses a heat-seeking camera to find cancerous growths (which are "hotter" than surrounding tissue).



However, even though thermography does show promise, women should not rush to use it to replace mammography, says Tanya Edwards, M.D., medical director for the Center for Integrative Medicine at Cleveland Clinic. Thermography is very sensitive, she says, but it "falls very short in being specific; it is unable to discern benign from malignant" growths.

Breen admits the National Cancer Institute study is controversial, and she's glad it has produced so much debate. "One good thing about this study is that it has generated a lot of publicity, so maybe it will make women think about getting screened again," she says.

Breen is already looking toward beginning the 2010 mammogram use study (the Cancer Institute surveys mammogram use every five years). "Our next national screening will tell us whether these results were a blip on the screen, or whether breast cancer screening is continuing to decline," she says.