

[IMAGE]

## **Breast Cancer: Don't Depend on Self-Exams**

Breast cancer is the second most common form of cancer among American women. Cases are relatively rare before age 40, but risk increases with age. Currently, many women perform self-examinations for early detection of cancer, a method that has been encouraged for years. Evidence suggests that while many tumors are self-detected, most are found accidentally (while bathing, etc.) - not during a self-exam.

A review published in the June 26, 2001 issue of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* evaluated the effectiveness of self-exams in screening for breast cancer in a group of 40- to 69-year-old Canadian women. The review utilized seven breast cancer studies from different nations, including the U.S., to evaluate the effectiveness of self-exams in preventing death and providing early detection.

This research showed no evidence of the benefit from regular self-examinations. Neither regular performance nor education on the proper technique for self-examinations reduced the likelihood of breast cancer mortality or provided earlier detection. On the other hand, the studies showed the potential harm of self-exams, in the form of excessive visits to physicians for benign (safe) breast lesions and excessive rates of unnecessary biopsies (removal of breast tissue for analysis).

Don't depend on a home exam alone to warn you of developing breast cancer. Until more research is done on the effects of self-exams, though, you should continue to perform them as recommended by your physician. Also, report any changes you notice in the surrounding tissue and bring up any concerns you have about the condition. When it comes to beating breast cancer, early detection is vital.

### *Reference:*

Baxter N. Preventive health care, 2001 update: Should women be routinely taught breast self-examination to screen for breast cancer? *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, June 26, 2001: 164(13), pp. 1837-1846.

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