NBCC
NATIONAL BREAST CANCER COALITION

Public Policy

Beyond the Headlines: Advocate Perspective on Breast Cancer News
Breast Cancer Mortality Rates in U.S. Women Younger than 40 Years

Within the last week or so, you may have read one of many news pieces circulating that reported on a study about the possibility that breast cancer mortality rates in younger women are going up. (See, e.g., "Breast cancer death rates have risen slightly for women in their 20s and 30s," published in the Washington Post, Saturday, Feb. 13, 2021.) [1] These headlines are misleading. The National Breast Cancer Coalition (NBCC) wants you to have the facts.

We must analyze this information in the context that breast cancer in younger women is uncommon. According to the American Cancer Society (ACS),[2] in 2020, approximately 268,600 women were diagnosed with invasive breast cancers, 4 percent of which were in women under the age of 40, with the median age of diagnosis of 62 years of age. Moreover, approximately 2.6% of the roughly 43,000 deaths from breast cancer expected to occur in 2021 will be in women in women 20 to 39 years of age, with 23.2 percent in women between 40-59 years 74.2 percent 60 years and older.

While NBCC believes that any deaths to breast cancer are too many, it is important to have an accurate assessment of the problem. Is the mortality rate in younger women with breast cancer actually rising?

The actual study was a bit different than the news reports of it. The Hendrick study that is the subject of the news reports showed that annual deaths from breast cancer were declining for women 20 to 39 from ~1990 to 2010 (and for women 40 years and older through 2017), likely the result of improved treatments. However, their analysis also showed that between 2010 to 2017, deaths from breast cancer had plateaued for women 20 to 39 years old, with no significant increase in the mortality rate for this age group, holding steady at about 2.75 3 per 100,000 women. There are several possible reasons for the mortality plateau in younger women: women who develop breast cancer early in life are typically diagnosed with more aggressive cancers. There are no targeted treatments and have a worse prognosis (e.g., triple-negative breast cancer). The reaction to these data is often to expand screening in this age group. However, the scientific evidence does not support that response. Lowering the age at which universal screening begins, which many see as the take-away message from this article, is not a solution. There is no evidence that screening, which has never been broadly recommended in this age group, would lower the mortality rate.[3] What is needed are better treatments, a way to prevent lethal disease, and, most importantly, stopping women and men from getting breast cancer in the first place.

All deaths from breast cancer are unacceptable. That is why NBCC trains its advocates to critically analyze information, so that policy approaches to ending breast cancer are based on evidence and are meaningful.

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[1] Hendrick RE, Helvie MA, Monticciolo DL. Breast Cancer Mortality Rates Have Stopped Declining in U.S. Women Younger than 40 Years. Radiology. 2021 Feb 9:203476. doi: 10.1148/radiol.2021203476. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 33560186. Link: https://pubs.rsna.org/doi/10.1148/radiol.2021203476

[2] American Cancer Society. Breast Cancer Facts & Figures 2019-2020. Atlanta: American Cancer Society, Inc. 2019.

[3] According to a comprehensive analysis conducted by the United States Preventive Services Task Force, screening does not reduce all-cause mortality (the primary goal of screening) in any age group, and only minimally reduces breast cancer mortality for women between the ages of 50 and 69.