New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
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Health Bulletin:

Get Checked for Breast Cancer

#19 in a series of Health Bulletins on issues of pressing interest to all New Yorkers

NYC Health
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Mammograms save lives.

- Breast cancer kills more than 1,200 New York City women each year. It kills more non-smoking women than any other cancer.
- Regular mammograms can detect breast cancer early enough for it to be successfully treated, well before lumps can be felt in the breast.
- Women 40 and older should get a mammogram every 1 to 2 years.

Breast Cancer Treatment Can Be More Successful When Started Early

- Most breast cancers cause no symptoms.
- When breast cancer is detected before it has spread, the 5-year survival rate is 97%.
  - If cancer has spread to underarm lymph nodes, the survival rate drops to 79%.
  - If it spreads beyond the lymph nodes to other organs, the survival rate is 23%.
- Regular mammograms can detect small lumps or changes in breast tissue before a woman or her doctor can feel these changes – and early enough to be successfully treated.

Mammograms Are Safe and Effective

- A mammogram is an X-ray examination of the breast to detect changes in breast tissue that may be cancer. Most changes in breast tissue are not cancer. The procedure usually takes about 20 minutes.
- Mammograms are recommended every 1 to 2 years for women 40 and older.
  - Mammograms use very low levels of radiation, and do not pose health risks.
  - One mammogram exposes a woman to the same amount of radiation as a person would get flying from New York to California on a plane.

What Does the Doctor Look For?

- Mammograms can change over time. It is important for the doctor to look at previous mammograms for comparison.
  - If you change doctors, make sure your new doctor receives your medical records, including all mammogram results.
- An abnormal mammogram is not the same as having cancer. Most abnormal mammograms are not cancer.
  - If a mammogram raises a suspicion of cancer, the radiologist will recommend a biopsy.
  - In a biopsy, a tiny amount of tissue is removed and examined. Biopsies do not change the shape or look of the breast.

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Breast Cancer Risk Factors

- Any woman can develop breast cancer. None knows what causes breast cancer. However, women are at higher risk if they:
  - Are obese.
  - Do not get enough physical activity.
  - Consume more than 1 drink of alcohol per day.
  - Smoke. For free help quitting, call the Smokers' Quitline at 311.
- **Women with the following risk factors may need to start getting mammograms at a younger age, or more often. Make sure your doctor knows if you:**
  - Ever had breast cancer yourself. If you had cancer in one breast, it is more likely to develop in the other breast.
  - Have a close relative (mother, sister, or daughter) who has ever had breast cancer. (However, most women who develop breast cancer have no family history of the disease.)
  - Have gone through menopause. Breast cancer is more common among post-menopausal women. Risk increases with age.
  - Are on estrogens or hormone replacement therapy, or take birth control pills.
  - Were ever prescribed DES (diethylstilbestrol), or if your mother took DES while she was pregnant with you.
  - Began menstruation early (before age 12), or went through menopause late (after age 55).
  - Never had children, or first full-term pregnancy after age 30.
- An injury to the breast does not increase breast cancer risk. Neither does having breast implants or terminating a pregnancy.
- White women are more likely to get breast cancer, but black women are more likely to die from it.
  - This may be due to lack of access to state-of-the-art medical care and delays in following up on abnormal mammography findings.
  - All women regardless of race/ethnicity have an excellent chance of being cured of breast cancer if it is detected early.

Preventing Breast Cancer

- To reduce breast cancer risk:
  - *Breast-feed your baby.* Some studies show that breast-feeding lowers breast cancer risk.
  - *Take aspirin daily.* New evidence suggests that a daily "low-dose" aspirin tablet (81 mg.) may reduce breast cancer risk. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of daily aspirin therapy.
- Research is continuing on whether the drugs tamoxifen and raloxifene may be effective in preventing breast cancer among women at higher risk.

Where to Get a Mammogram

- Get a mammogram at an imaging facility that either specializes in mammography or does many mammograms a day.
  - Your doctor or other health care provider will give you a referral if you need one.
  - Mammograms are covered by most health insurance plans.
- If you don't have insurance, you may be eligible for free or low-cost screenings. Call 311 for more information.
- New York State has breast cancer screening programs for low-income women who are uninsured or underinsured. For information, visit www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/cancer/center/partnerships.htm, or call 311.

More Information

- NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: nyc.gov/health/tcny or call 311
- New York State Department of Health: www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/cancer/center/publication.htm
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp
- National Cancer Institute: www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/types/breast
- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org or call 1-800-ACS-2345
- National Breast Cancer Coalition: www.natlbcc.org

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