Women Without Breast Cancer Symptoms Should Delay Routine Mammograms

Screening mammograms should be postponed until later this year—or longer, if the coronavirus crisis continues.

March 23, 2020 By Liz Highleyman

Healthy women at average risk for breast cancer should postpone routine screening mammograms during the coronavirus crisis, according to the Susan G. Komen breast cancer organization.

Under normal circumstances, the United States Preventive Services Task Force recommends that women ages 50 to 74 who are at average risk for breast cancer should undergo screening mammograms every other year. Some organizations recommend annual screening starting at age 40 or 45.

But today's circumstances are far from normal.

The pandemic now sweeping the globe has strained health care workers and facilities to their limit. Many providers are now focused on caring for people with COVID-19, the potentially fatal respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus.

In many areas, people are being asked to "shelter in place" and stay home except for obtaining necessary supplies and medical care. What's more, health facilities may pose a risk of infection, especially given the shortage of personal protective equipment, such as face masks.

The Susan G. Komen organization now suggests that healthy women of average risk delay routine breast cancer screening "until later this year." It is, of course, impossible to predict at this early stage how long the current crisis will last. Case numbers continue to rise in the United States and worldwide, there are no approved treatments for COVID-19 and experts estimate that a coronavirus vaccine will not be available for 12 to 18 months.

The organization stresses, however, that people who have warning signs of breast cancer—including a change in the look or feel of the breasts or nipples or nipple discharge—should contact their health care provider to determine their need for diagnostic imaging. Women at high

risk, including those who carry BRCA mutations, should also consult their provider.

“As our health care system across the country begins to feel the strain from dealing with COVID-19, we all share a responsibility to help stem the spread and to support our health care providers as they focus on those most in need of care,” said Komen’s chief scientific adviser, George Sledge Jr., MD, of Stanford University. “Now is the time for doctors to delay routine screenings for healthy people who are not displaying warning signs of breast cancer. This also means it is critically important for people to know what is normal for them and to report to their health care provider any changes so that necessary care can be provided.”

Click here for Cancer Health’s continuing coverage of COVID-19.

Click here to learn what people living with cancer need to know about the new coronavirus and COVID-19.

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