

Women's health: Now what?

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On Nov. 16, the United States Preventive Services Task Force — an independent panel of experts appointed by the federal Department of Health and Human Services — released new guidelines recommending that most women start regular breast cancer screening at age 50, not 40. The guidelines also questioned the need for self-examination.

Later the same week, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists released its own new report, saying that women don't need their first cervical cancer screening, or Pap test, until they are 21. In addition, the group suggested fewer follow-up exams.

Response to the two reports has been mixed, with reputable groups either taking issue, or agreeing, with the new advice.



Rochelle Shoretz

Rochelle Shoretz, founder of Sharsheret — a Teaneck-based organization that addresses the concerns of young Jewish women facing breast cancer — said the organization is encouraging all women to speak with their health-care providers about the method and frequency of screening, pointing out that “even the task force recommends a tailored approach,” with women at higher risk being guided to different modalities.

Shoretz found her own tumor at age 28 while doing a self-exam. A subsequent mammogram confirmed her findings. While the new guidelines pertain to women with an “average” risk of getting breast cancer — not to those with a family history of the disease or women with genetic mutations associated with breast cancer, such as BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes — Shoretz noted that breast cancer does not run in her family, so she would not have been considered high risk.

“Early detection saves lives,” she said, adding that Sharsheret “recommends that every woman speak to her health-care provider to establish screening modalities for herself.”

The organization was scheduled to hold a free national teleconference about the guidelines this week, during which radiologist Dr. Thomas Kolb, a Sharsheret medical advisory board member, and the organization's genetic counselor, Niecee Singer Schonberger, would address the concerns of interested callers.

Shoretz, a former law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, said that since the organization's founding in 2001, Sharsheret has responded to thousands of phone calls from health-care professionals, Jewish organizations, women's organizations, women affected by breast cancer, their families, and friends.

Stressing that it is important for the public to recognize that the task force's recommendations are not binding, she noted that the American Cancer Society has decided to keep its own longstanding recommendation that annual screenings begin at age 40, “a key piece of knowledge.”

Shoretz said that since Jewish women of Ashkenazic descent are at greater risk for hereditary breast cancer, “the guidelines are of particular note” to organizations like Sharsheret.

“The release of the guidelines, like any news touching on mammography, kicks up dust and uncertainty,” she said. “We need to find the best cancer screening modality. It's agreed that we don't have the perfect screening mechanism.”

“The guidelines will breed a level of uncertainty and confusion,” said Shoretz. “That's why speaking with your health-care provider is so important.”

The Sharsheret founder said the organization's blog has already begun to generate a good deal of discussion on the issue.

"As difficult as this is, new discussion and further discussion can be a good thing in the long run."

Asked about the new guidelines, the Northern New Jersey Chapter of Hadassah cited a recent statement by the national organization reaffirming its commitment to breast health awareness, including regular breast self-exams and both annual clinical exams and annual mammograms beginning at age 40.

Said the statement: "Hadassah is dedicated to educating women about healthy life choices that prevent disease and promote wellness, including screenings and self-examinations for the purposes of early detection."

Like Sharsheret, the organization recommends that women talk to their health-care professionals about individual risks and develop a screening plan.

For more information about Hadassah's women's health programs, call (212) 303-8136, e-mail programming@hadassah.org , or visit www.hadassah.org/womenshealth.

For information about Sharsheret, call the organization at (866) 474-2774 or visit www.sharsheret.org.