Where Breast Cancer Screening Rates Dropped During COVID-19

Community clinics in low-income communities saw a decline in breast cancer screening during the pandemic, new report finds.

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A new study finds breast cancer screening declined among women aged 50 to 74 years within 32 community health centers that serve lower-income populations during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. The report, appearing in the journal, CANCER, suggests that breast cancer screening rates within community clinics in low-income communities declined by 8% from July 2019-2020, reversing an 18% improvement between July 2018-2019.

This is one of the first studies to examine breast cancer screening rates among lower-income populations during the pandemic. Investigators led by Stacey Fedewa, PhD of the American Cancer Society, examined breast cancer screening rates among 32 community health centers that provide healthcare services to communities of color and lower-income populations and received grant funding from the American Cancer Society (ACS) to improve their BCSRs.

“This study is important because these populations have long-standing barriers to accessing care, lower breast screening rates, higher breast cancer mortality rates, and are especially vulnerable to healthcare disruptions,” said Dr. Fedewa.

Findings show that if 2018 to 2019 breast cancer screening rate trends continued through 2020, 63.3% of women would have been screened for breast cancer in 2020 compared to the 49.6% of women that did get screened. This data translates to potentially 47,517 fewer mammograms and 242 missed breast cancer diagnoses.

It is not yet known how negative outcomes will be distributed, and if breast cancer mortality disparities will widen. It is also not known how breast cancer screening services fared in community health centers nationwide as the clinics included in this study were part of an ACS grant funded by the National Football League to improve breast cancer screening rates. Authors note that it’s possible that interventions established before and continued through 2020 may have mitigated the pandemic’s effects on breast cancer screening services.

“Declining breast cancer screening rates in clinics serving communities with lower-incomes that already have barriers to accessing healthcare and have higher breast cancer mortality rates

means there is a need for additional policies to support and resources to identify women in need of screening," said the authors. "These actions will be critical as communities and clinics return to screening with hopes of reaching pre-pandemic breast cancer screening rates in the communities they serve."

Article: Fedewa SA, Cotter MM, Wehling K, Wysocki K, Killewald R, Makaroff L. Changes in breast cancer screening rates among 32 community health centers during the COVID-19 pandemic. CANCER, 2021. doi: 10.1002/cncr.0038.

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