Women Who Speak Only Spanish Less Likely to Get Mammograms

Language barriers prevent some women from receiving potentially lifesaving breast cancer screenings.

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Among Hispanic women, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer and the leading cause of cancer death. Unfortunately, language barriers prevent some of these women from getting the potentially lifesaving mammograms they need.

New findings presented at the American College of Surgeons Clinical Congress 2020 revealed that women who speak only Spanish aren't being screened for breast cancer as often as those who speak English proficiently, according to a Newswise press release.

The study of 9,653 women age 40 and older living in the United States showed that 1,040 women had limited English-language proficiency, meaning they spoke only or primarily a language besides English. Of those women with limited English proficiency, 712 spoke only Spanish.

About 936 women with limited English proficiency provided their mammogram information, which revealed that their rate of screening mammograms was 78% less than proficient English speakers who were screened at a rate of 90%. Furthermore, more than 200 women with limited English reported that they had never received a mammogram.

The findings showed that for every 100 English-speaking women who received a screening mammogram, only 73 Spanish-only speakers got one. According to lead study investigator Jose L. Cataneo, MD, a general surgery resident at the University of Illinois at Chicago/Metropolitan Group Hospitals, that translates to about 450,000 American women between ages 40 and 75 who were eligible for a mammogram but didn't get one.

Mammography guidelines vary by age in the United States, so the researchers also analyzed different age groups (40 to 50, 45 to 75 and 50 to 75). "In all three groups, we found that those with limited English proficiency had less frequency of getting a screening mammogram," Cataneo said.

Experts believe that many factors, including poverty, lack of health insurance and fear of mammograms, could explain why women who don't speak English proficiently are less likely to get

mammography screenings.

However, researchers hope that increasing educational efforts around breast health, the importance of screening and advances in breast cancer treatment, especially in Spanish, could motivate more women with limited English to get a mammogram.

For related coverage, read “It’s Time to Grapple With Higher Rate of Cancer Among Latinos” and “Earlier Screening for Breast Cancer May Reduce Mortality.”

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