

Timely follow-up may reduce anxiety in women with abnormal mammograms

Women who need to undergo follow-up examination may experience long-term psychosocial harm if they have to wait weeks for a clear answer.

One solution? Fast follow-up – if possible, same day.

There's no doubt that screening mammography has made invaluable contributions to the battle against breast cancer. Unfortunately, not all mammograms are readily interpretable; each year, five to 15 percent of the women undergoing this critically important test are called back for a closer look.ⁱ Although most of these follow-up tests turn out to be negative, waiting for results can cause psychosocial scars for a woman – anxiety and depression that may be severe enough to deter her from returning for her next screening exam.ⁱⁱ

A number of researchers have investigated this problem over the last decade. Not surprisingly, most agree that the psychosocial problems resulting from a recall can increase a woman's worry and anxiety about breast cancer.ⁱⁱⁱ

And that's true even when the follow-up exam is negative for breast cancer. In fact, one team of investigators found that such false-positives can cause long-lasting emotional harm as severe as what's experienced in the wake of a breast-cancer diagnosis – and that some women continue to report negative psychosocial consequences three years after being declared cancer-free.^{iv}

These conclusions are not entirely consistent across studies. For instance, while some researchers have reported persistent consequences, others have found only transient anxiety.^{v,vi}

Such inconsistencies may be at least partly a reflection of the length of delay to final diagnosis.

For example, one group of researchers looked specifically at the impact of immediate radiologist intervention versus delayed batch reading of abnormal mammograms. These findings suggested that when women's mammograms were read immediately, they experienced lower levels of anxiety compared to those whose mammograms were read in a batch 3 weeks following the mammogram.^{vii}

These researchers also compared the impact of immediate radiologist intervention to providing women with educational tools – tools designed to teach them more about mammography and follow-up procedures while arming them with anxiety-coping skills such as deep breathing, sharing the experience with a friend or taking a walk to distract oneself.

These educational efforts failed to provide much relief, they reported, while immediate radiologist intervention successfully reduced participants' anxiety. It was found that rapidly evaluating mammographic abnormalities may be a more effective means of reducing women's anxieties than seeking to change emotional reactions to an inconclusive mammogram.^{viii}

Another research team studied this issue by surveying two groups of women within six weeks of their follow-up exams. They found that those who had been imaged immediately after an abnormal mammogram reported less stress than those who had to be called back in.^{ix}

In other words, an effective way to preclude psychosocial harm may be simply to deliver the “cancer free” verdict just as quickly as possible – ideally, the same day that the abnormal mammogram was acquired.

Recent technological advances are making such rapid follow-up more practical. Consider, for example, breast-imaging facilities equipped with SenoBright* contrast-enhanced spectral mammography, a capability available for GE Healthcare’s Senographe* Essential and DS systems.

This technology helps localize suspected lesions to help medical professionals make diagnostics decisions faster. Yet the acquisition itself is as easily accomplished as a conventional mammogram; it can be conducted in the same exam room, on the same equipment, by the same staff, in about ten minutes. The result is a practical addition to most facilities’ workflows – an addition that may make it possible to conduct follow-up evaluations immediately, and therefore minimize the psychosocial harm associated with follow-up exams.

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GE Healthcare
9900 Innovation Drive
Wauwatosa, WI 53226, U.S.A.
www.gehealthcare.com

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