

## Breast Health Surveillance

# CLINICAL POSITION STATEMENT

AWHONN strongly encourages all women to take an active role in their own breast health surveillance. Women should perform monthly breast self-examinations (BSE), undergo periodic clinical breast examinations (CBE) by a qualified health care provider, and have access to screening mammography. Recommended intervals for screening mammography, the most advanced method of breast surveillance, for women without risk factors are generally based on age. Screening mammography should be available according to the following schedule:

- Age 18-40:** Screening mammography recommendations based on risk assessment.
- Age 40-50:** Screening mammography recommended every 1-2 years.
  - ◆ Annually if indicated by risk assessment.
- Age 50+:** Yearly screening mammography.

AWHONN advocates local, state and federal policies that recommend and secure funding for screening mammography according to these guidelines. AWHONN supports efforts to educate women, health care professionals and policy-makers about the critical importance of performing BSE in conjunction with CBE and screening mammography. Almost 70% of palpable lesions are found by women performing regular BSE. While mammography is considered the best screening method available for identifying breast abnormalities, some 10% of breast abnormalities in older women and 25% in younger women go undetected by mammogram. Therefore, it is important to integrate all of the early breast health surveillance techniques - BSE, CBE and mammography screening - into a successful breast health surveillance plan.

**Background:** Screening mammography is used to evaluate women for breast cancer in absence of signs or symptoms of the disease. It is performed on women who want to assess their breast health. Due to its ability to detect lesions long before they are palpable, mammography is a key component of a comprehensive breast health surveillance plan. Early detection improves a woman's chance for survival of breast cancer.

While experts agree that all women over 50 should include routine screening mammography in their breast health surveillance plans, opinions vary regarding the best mammography screening intervals for women under age 50. In general, the younger a patient, the more dense her breast tissue, and the more difficult it is to read her mammogram. However, since 20% of cancers are now detected in women under the age of 50, AWHONN strongly encourages all women to work with their health care providers to carefully evaluate their risks for breast cancer. After a thorough risk assessment, the woman can further collaborate with her health care provider to develop an individualized plan for screening.

Risk assessment for breast cancer includes age, age at menarche, age at first birth, family and personal history of breast abnormalities, findings from any earlier breast biopsies, and the use of hormonal therapies. Women under the age of 50 who are identified as being high risk for breast cancer may need earlier or more frequent screening mammography and CBE than their lower risk counterparts.

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