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New mammogram guidelines will cause women to wait on tests, raise risks, experts say

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They've never had breast cancer. They're on the fence about whether to get a mammogram. And they're the women who breast cancer patient advocate [PJ Hamel](#) worries about the most.



"The sad thing is that now, many women who didn't want a

mammogram anyway can rationalize that the government doesn't want them to have one until they turn 50, so they'll just forget about it until they're in their 50s," says Hamel, who is 56. "My breast cancer was diagnosed at 47 with a mammogram. If I had waited till age 50, I would be dead."

A federally appointed task force advised earlier this week that most women shouldn't start routine screening for breast cancer until age 50, as opposed to the current recommendation of age 40, and that women from 50 to 74 be screened only every two years instead of annually. Since the controversial new guidelines were unveiled, angry, confused patients have been calling their doctors, and many physicians are advising their patients to ignore the new guidelines.

For those women whose cancers were diagnosed with a mammogram, the new guidelines elicit anger and frustration. [Cindy Arroyo](#) had no family history of breast cancer when she received her diagnosis at the age of 48. The five suspicious spots on her mammogram all turned out to be malignant, and she

had a double mastectomy followed by chemotherapy three and a half years ago.

"If I had waited two years, until I was 50, the outcome would have been drastically different," Arroyo says. "These guidelines will discourage women from being able to keep on top of their health."

Her 25-year-old daughter had a baseline mammogram earlier this year and should have regular screenings, Arroyo says. "For many women, two years in between mammograms is way too long to wait," she says.

Many young women who delay getting a mammogram will be at an increased risk of breast cancer if insurers and doctors start adhering to the new guidelines, says Maimah Karmo, who runs a breast cancer awareness, education and support group called the [TigerLily Foundation](#). Some 11,000 women under the age of 40 are diagnosed with breast cancer each year, she says, and 1,100 lose their lives annually to the disease. "Girls have been calling here and they are upset and very angry," Karmo says. "Many of them are young women who are alive because their cancers got detected in time. It's frustrating because we are working to increase breast cancer awareness and then these new guidelines come out and tell women not to have a mammogram until they're 50."

Maria Milios was 43 when her doctor encouraged her to get a routine mammogram. Diagnosed with a fast-spreading invasive breast cancer, Milios underwent a double mastectomy followed by chemotherapy. She was told that her own daughter should start having mammograms when she was 10 years younger than her mother was at diagnosis. That means her daughter, now 25, should be screened beginning at 33.

"If I had waited till age 50 my cancer would have spread to other organs," Milios says. "These new guidelines mean that a lot of ladies will be missed."

Some breast cancer survivors, like PJ Hamel hope to keep educating women through sites such as [Mybreastcancernetwork.com](#). Others, like [Stephanie Robin](#), who was diagnosed at age 36 with breast cancer that had spread to a lymph node, continues to fundraise. She founded Think Pink Rocks with friend as a way to raise money for breast cancer research. After Robin had a double mastectomy and a hysterectomy, her doctors found tumors in her lung. Two years ago, she joined a clinical trial at [Memorial Sloan Kettering](#), and those lung tumors are 90 percent smaller, she says.

"Thank God, I'm doing great," Robin says. "But it's been a long road."