

Tough facts about breast cancer

By Kelly Shanahan

“You have breast cancer.” More than 260,000 American women heard those words in 2010, and nearly 40,000 of them did not survive the year. But a diagnosis of breast cancer does not have to be a death sentence.

Although the odds of developing breast cancer have increased from 1 in 20 in 1960 to 1 in 8 today, the number of women diagnosed has declined in the last decade. The decline in new cases is attributed to early detection, advanced treatments and a decrease in advanced treatments and a decrease in postmenopausal hormone replacement therapy.



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Many women are confused about the role of early detection and aren't sure if they should do breast self-exams or when they should get a mammogram. This uncertainty was fueled by the United States Preventive Services Task Force, whose 2009 statement advised women to forego self-exams, wait until age 50 to start getting mammograms, and then get them only every two years thereafter.

The federal recommendations came down to money: starting mammograms at age 40 costs the government more. Fewer women in their 40s have breast cancer, but those who do have more

aggressive cancers and higher survival rates when diagnosed early.

Fortunately, Kathleen Sebelius, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, ensured that Medicare and other government programs would continue to pay for annual mammograms starting at age 40, and the decision on when and how often to have a mammogram would be left up to each woman and her doctor.

Many women still do not get regular mammograms, both because of the cost and their own fears – of pain from the procedure, of radiation exposure and of a possible cancer diagnosis.

The compression associated with mammograms is uncomfortable, but it only lasts a minute. Radiation is minimal with digital mammography. A digital mammogram machine uses compression and X-rays, and the image is captured to a computer as a digital file.

Barton Health offers low-cost mammograms to women who qualify. See your doctor, discuss your risks and get your mammogram ...It may just save your life.

Kelly Shanahan is a gynecologist and founder of Emerald Bay Center for Women's Health. She has been practicing in Lake Tahoe and Minden for 17 years and is one of 2.5 million breast cancer survivors in the U.S.