Pediatric Cancer Survivors Lack Mammography

BY MARY ANN MOON
Contributing Writer

Most young women who received chest radiation for childhood cancer are not being appropriately screened for breast cancer, despite their high risk.

The primary barrier to screening is not a lack of medical contact; rather, it is that their physicians do not advise them to get mammography, most likely because they are not aware of these patients’ high risk, said Dr. Kevin C. Oeffinger of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, and his associates.

Experts recommend that women who were treated with moderate- to high-dose chest radiation for pediatric malignancy initiate breast cancer surveillance starting at age 25 years, or 8 years after undergoing radiotherapy, whichever comes last. The median age of breast cancer diagnosis in these patients is 32-35 years, and their previous exposure to radiation or anthracycline limits their treatment options.

There are an estimated 20,000-25,000 such women in the United States, and an unknown number of female cancer survivors worldwide fall into this category. Dr. Oeffinger and his colleagues studied breast cancer surveillance using the large, geographically diverse population of women participating in the Childhood Cancer Survivor Study. This study follows more than 9,000 cancer survivors who were diagnosed between 1970 and 1986. A random sample of 351 CCS patients aged 25-50 years who received chest radiation for a pediatric malignancy and were still alive as children were surveyed regarding breast cancer survivorship. Two comparison groups—one with 561 CCSS survivors who had not undergone chest radiation and 622 siblings of CCS subjects who had never had cancer—were assessed.

Nearly half of the women under age 40 years who had been exposed to pediatric radiotherapy had never had a mammogram, and only 23% had undergone mammography within the preceding 12 months. This “much lower than expected” rate was still somewhat higher than the rates in the CCSS siblings (11%) and the cancer survivors who had not undergone chest radiotherapy (13%). Only one-third of the high-risk women said that their physicians had advised mammography.

Physical Health Plays Into Breast Cancer Survival

SAN ANTONIO — Breast cancer survivors with poor physical health, particularly those with limited physical activity, have a worse prognosis than those with adequate health, based on the results of a study of almost 3,000 survivors followed for 6 years.

Approximately 40% of breast cancer survivors are at higher risk because of their poor physical health, according to the investigators. Dr. Abu N. Saquib, Ph.D., wrote in a poster presented at the San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium.

Dr. Saquib and his coinvestigators at the University of California, San Diego, assessed the effect of physical health and physical activity on additional breast cancer events and deaths among 2,967 early-stage breast cancer survivors, who were enrolled in the Women’s Healthy Eating and Living study during 1995-2000. The investigators found that both physical activity and physical health were strong predictors of breast cancer prognosis on univariate analysis. However, multivariate analysis—which adjusted for age, race, body mass index, menopausal status, tumor type, tumor stage, anti-estrogen use, and other factors—showed that physical health was a stronger predictor of additional breast cancer events and deaths than physical activity.

The investigators found that breast cancer survivors with poor physical health status, particularly those with limited physical activity, have a worse prognosis than those with adequate health, based on the results of a study of almost 3,000 survivors followed for 6 years.

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