Mammograms Can Help Detect Heart Disease, Study Says

By ACSH Staff — March 31, 2016

A mammogram might do more than just screen for breast cancer. According to findings from a recent study, the test might also help detect a woman's risk of heart disease.

The research, published online and ahead of print in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology: Cardiovascular Imaging*[^3], focused on 292 women and assessed what's called breast arterial calcification, or BAC. The goal was to see if BAC levels were related to levels of calcium in a woman's coronary arteries, or the arteries specific to the heart.

This is important because coronary artery calcification is an early sign of coronary artery disease, which if left unaddressed, can lead to full blown atherosclerosis, thus increasing one's risk for a heart attack.

Results showed that women who had higher levels of mammography-detected BAC were over three times as likely to have coronary artery calcification. That would indicate strong evidence to support BAC as a predictor of calcium levels in the coronary arteries.

What's more, BAC was equally as strong at predicting coronary artery calcium deposits — and therefore heart disease — as more traditional methods including blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Speaking with *The Wall Street Journal*[^4], Dr. Laurie Margolies, chief of breast imaging at Mount Sinai Medical Center, and lead author of the study, says that the results identify "an accessible way with no extra cost and no extra radiation [exposure] of determining someone's risk for cardiovascular disease."

This has important public health implications because it could mean eliminating the need for a separate test that scans specifically for coronary artery calcium altogether.

Coronary artery calcification is typically assessed by employing a very specific method using electron beam computed tomography (EBCT)[^5] and multi-detector computed tomography (MDCT) [^5]
Together, the two machines use X-rays to create pictures of the heart and doctors then scan the pictures for coronary artery calcification.

Although the findings of this research are promising, one problem still remains: BAC is not necessarily tested for in all mammograms.

"If such information were routinely included in a mammogram report, it could lead women to undergo further tests, including blood tests or heart scans to evaluate their heart risk," Dr. Margiolies adds. "That could prompt such preventive strategies as changes in diet and exercise or use of cholesterol-lowering drugs called statins to reduce heart risk."

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