

DES Daughters At Increased Breast Cancer Risk After Age 40

"Prenatal Diethylstilbestrol Exposure and Risk of Breast Cancer," by Julie R. Palmer, et al, *Cancer Epidemiology Biomarkers and Prevention*, August 2006.

Reviewed by Fran Howell

A new group of women has been identified as having an increased risk for breast cancer. Using information collected by the on-going National Cancer Institute DES Follow-up Study, researcher Julie Palmer found that DES Daughters are nearly two times more likely to develop breast cancer, after age 40, than unexposed women. Palmer is at Boston University's Slone Epidemiology Center and is a Principal Investigator with the NCI DES Follow-up Study.

She and her team compared exposed and unexposed participants, taking into account the number of births and the age at first birth, among other factors related to breast cancer risk. The analysis included 4,817 exposed and 2,073 unexposed women, and, to date, 102 cases of invasive breast cancer have occurred in the combined group.

According to Palmer, "the finding that DES Daughters are 1.9 times as likely to get breast cancer once they hit age 40, compared with unexposed women, confirms the hypothesis that prenatal hormone levels influence breast cancer risks."

She adds that for DES Daughters over age 50, the estimated relative risk was even higher, but the smaller number of study cases in this older age

group means additional research is needed to confirm the finding. She says, "knowing what we do about the heightened breast cancer risk for DES Daughters over age 40, I urge them to pay attention to this new information."

"What we are telling DES Daughters is that they should get annual breast screenings after the age of 40," says DES Action Program Director Kari Christianson. She points out that the American Cancer Society makes the same recommendation for all women. However, she adds, "DES Daughters should remain extra vigi-

lant. That means having your health care provider do a clinical breast exam

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when you go in for your yearly gynecological screening, having an annual mammogram, and doing routine

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breast self-exams."

According to Christianson, "for many years DES Daughters were focused primarily on their increased risk for vaginal and cervical cancer. Now they must pay attention to their breast cancer risk as well."

News of this study doesn't surprise DES Daughter (and DES Action member) Deborah Wingard. At age 39 she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Wingard discovered a lump in her breast not long after having a clear mammogram, so she's a strong advocate of breast self-exams. Ten years later another diagnosis of cancer meant a second mastectomy. Wingard urges all DES Daughters to pay serious attention to this breast cancer risk.

According to researcher Palmer, "this is really unwelcome news because many DES Daughters are just now approaching the age at which breast cancer becomes more common."

Her study suggests that DES-exposed women are developing the typical range of breast cancers, after age 40, at a faster rate than unexposed women of the same ages. Palmer says the research team also found the highest relative risk of developing breast cancer was observed in study participants from groups with the highest cumulative doses of DES exposure.

When asked about HRT use by DES Daughters, Palmer says it might be wise for exposed women to avoid these extra hormones, if possible. "Use of hormone supplements is, in itself, an independent

breast cancer risk factor, so DES Daughters may choose not to compound their already increased risk."

Although researchers do not completely understand the DES connection to breast cancer, Palmer says some scientists believe the excess estrogen increased the number of breast tissue stem cells available at birth - cells which could malignantly transform into cancer.

So if it is true that excess estrogen, in utero, impacts breast cancer risk later in life, "other environmental factors that increase fetal exposure to estrogenic compounds may do the same thing," Palmer says. "Our study suggests that such environmental exposures may deserve more serious consideration."

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