



DES Daughters At Increased Breast Cancer Risk

A new group of women has been identified as having an increased risk for breast cancer. According to a study led by Julie R. Palmer of Boston University's Slone Epidemiology Center, women who were exposed before birth to the anti-miscarriage drug diethylstilbestrol (DES) are nearly two times more likely to develop breast cancer, after age 40 than unexposed women. The study was published in August 2006, in the scientific journal, *Cancer Epidemiology Biomarkers and Prevention*.

DES is a synthetic estrogen that was prescribed to millions of pregnant women in the U.S. primarily from 1938-1971. Its use was thought to prevent miscarriage and ensure a healthy pregnancy. Since then it has been linked to reproductive cancers, infertility, and pregnancy problems for the estimated one to two million female offspring. These DES Daughters must now be on alert for breast cancer after age 40, as well.

Using information collected as part of the National Cancer Institute's on-going *DES Follow Up Study*, Palmer 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.

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 vigilant. That means having your health care provider do a clinical breast exam when you go in for your yearly gynecological screening, having an annual mammogram, and doing routine breast self-exams."

According to Christianson, “for many years DES Daughters were focused primarily on their increased risk for other reproductive cancers. Now they must pay attention to their breast cancer risk as well.”

News of this study doesn't surprise DES Daughter Deborah Wingard, of San Diego. At age 39 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She says, “I suspected right from the start that it resulted from my being exposed to DES before birth. Now we have the research to confirm that.”

Wingard discovered a lump in her breast not long after having a clear mammogram so she's a strong advocate for breast self-exams. Ten years later another diagnosis of cancer meant a second mastectomy. Wingard acknowledges that while all women are at risk for breast cancer, DES Daughters are at higher risk so they must be especially vigilant.

“It stands to reason that women will be motivated to take action and screen for breast cancer if they know they are at higher risk for the disease,” DES Action's Christianson explains. “But unfortunately, too many women don't know they were exposed to DES before birth, so they may not get the screenings they would get - *if* they knew they were in a higher risk group. That's a huge problem because early detection of breast cancer is the best course of action for women at increased risk for the disease.”

“Women who suspect they may have been exposed prenatally to the drug, DES, should try to get medical records to confirm it. While it is important for all of us to know our own personal health histories, it is even more important for DES Daughters, who must keep up with annual pelvic exams, and now breast screenings over age 40, in order to protect their health,” says Christianson.

For more information about DES, contact DES Action at (800) 337-9288 or email info@desaction.org. You can also learn more from these web sites: www.desaction.org; and www.DESfollowupstudy.org.

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