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Breast cancer warning over pregnancy drug

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Women whose mothers took a common anti-miscarriage drug during pregnancy could face nearly double the normal risk of developing breast cancer, researchers said today.

The US study of the drug diethylstilboestrol (DES), prescribed to pregnant women from the 1940s to 1975, urged women exposed to the drug in the womb to check their breasts regularly for signs of cancer and not to miss mammograms.

The study, by scientists at Boston University, found that the danger posed by DES increased with age.

While women under 40 did not seem to have any higher risk of breast cancer exposure, those over 40 were twice as likely to develop the disease. Women over 50 had an even higher risk, but there were too few in the study to determine whether that difference was statistically significant.

The researchers also said that the greater the amount of the drug taken by the mother, the more likely the daughter would develop the cancer.

The scientists compared rates of the disease in 4,817 women exposed to DES in the womb and 2,073 who were not. They identified 76 cases of breast cancer among exposed daughters and 26 among unexposed women.

Professor Julie Palmer, who led the Boston study, said those who were exposed to DES should be screened regularly for breast cancer. The drug was given to an estimated 200,000 women in the UK and around 2 million in the US.

"This is really unwelcome news because so many women worldwide were prenatally exposed to DES and they are just now approaching the age at which breast cancer becomes more common," Prof Palmer said.

Previous research also has found that mothers who took the drug

faced an increased risk of breast cancer. The use of DES was stopped in the 1970s after researchers found exposed daughters had a higher risk of developing rare cancers of the vagina and cervix and may also have problems getting pregnant. Exposed sons were found to have suffered low sperm counts and an increased risk of testicular cancer.

Ed Yong, a senior cancer information officer at Cancer Research UK, said: "This study suggests that daughters of mothers who took the drug DES during their pregnancies may have a higher risk of breast cancer as they get older, but this does not mean that they will definitely develop the disease.

"Early detection of breast cancer is important and all women should be aware of any unusual changes to their breasts and report them promptly. Women should be sure to attend their breast screening appointments when invited."

Heather Justice, of DES Action UK, told the Daily Mail: "We've known since the seventies about the risk of vaginal cancer and now as these women are getting to the menopause and there are hormonal changes, we are seeing breast cancers starting to emerge.

"People should be asking their mothers whether they can remember being prescribed it during their pregnancy, then insisting on proper screening and care."