Automated Breast Cancer Screening Reminders
Save Lives

KEY FACTS:
1. Only 5% of women follow the recommendation for yearly mammograms starting at age 40.
2. Only 9% of women recall receiving a reminder about their annual mammogram.
3. Consistent screening improves breast cancer survival rates by 90%.
4. Women who receive automated phone reminders are 32% more likely to complete a screening than those who receive mailed reminders alone.

Failure to receive annual breast cancer screening examinations is a common occurrence among women aged 40 and older. Unfortunately, this undermines the life-saving benefits of early detection and results in delayed diagnosis and treatment which could lead to death. Reminders and education through automated messaging can initiate breast cancer screenings, help patients follow national health recommendations of repeat annual screenings and ultimately reduce breast cancer deaths.

WHY BREAST CANCER SCREENING CONTINUES TO BE IMPORTANT
The best way to detect breast cancer in its earliest, most treatable stage is through mammography. Mammograms can expose cancer an average of one to three years before a lump is felt. The stage, or size of the cancer, at the point it is detected is the most important factor in determining the cancer’s outcome. A study published in the journal, Radiology, found that women who start getting mammograms at age 40 are 24% less likely to fall victim to breast cancer than women who don't get mammograms.

A yearly mammogram is recommended starting at 40.

- Women who do not receive a yearly breast exam
- Women who do get a yearly exam

Despite the documented effectiveness of mammograms and the extensive public attention given to the benefits, not all women follow the recommended guidelines for breast cancer screening. According to a study published by Cancer, a journal of the American Cancer Society, only one in 20 women consistently follow the recommendation of yearly mammograms starting at age 40. This dismissal of screening is believed to increase the breast cancer death rate by 50%.
WHY WOMEN AREN’T GETTING SCREENED

So why aren’t women following the recommended guidelines set out by such agencies as the American Cancer Society, the National Cancer Institute and the Centers for Disease Control? And beyond the guidelines, why don’t they recognize the importance of screening?

One of the most documented reasons given by women who did not have a mammogram is, “My doctor did not tell me to.” Of those who do make a mammogram screening appointment, 25% forget to attend the appointment. Both of these challenges can be attributed to lack of a timely and effective reminder system.

Many screening centers rely on staff making manual calls to remind women of their upcoming screening appointment. However, this method is costly, time-consuming, tedious and inefficient. Reminder calls are usually made during the day during regular office hours but not during the hours many women are home to receive the call. A large breast cancer center in California reported that reminder calls are not made on Sundays and as a result their rate of no-shows is twice as high on Mondays as on other days of the week. This same center reveals that two clerks spend three to six hours each day making reminder calls but their no-show rate remains at 10-30%.

A number of centers also lack the ability to identify women who have not made mammogram screening appointments and notify those who have missed appointments so they can be rescheduled.

In addition to logistical reasons for bleak appointment rates, there are also psychological barriers to breast cancer screening exams:

- Some women see no benefit in mammography.
- Some believe re-screening is unnecessary because a previous mammogram was normal.
- Some believe that because they self-examine for lumps, a mammogram is not necessary.
- Some women fail to get screened for fear of finding cancer.

In these instances, education is needed and can be delivered using the same system available for life-saving reminders.

GET THEM IN

Research shows that automated reminders are the most effective and cost-efficient method of promoting mammography screening. A study of 3,547 women due for a mammogram showed that reminders, including standard reminder letters, comprehensive reminder letters and automated telephone reminders increased mammography rates by 17.8%. However, women who received automated telephone reminders were 32% more likely to complete a mammography screening over those who received letters. The automated telephone reminders also outperformed the letters in terms of cost – a 74% savings! The authors of the study suggest that more than the content, the method of delivery of screening reminders is most important.
Another study of a medical imaging practice showed that automated phone calls for mammograms resulted in a 20% conversion rate. The practice targeted patients who have never been in for a mammogram and those who were 30 days past due for their next mammogram. With an average contact list of 500 patients per month, this outreach helped schedule an additional 1,200 mammograms annually – translating to $240,000 in additional appointment revenue for the practice.

To overcome psychological barriers to mammogram scheduling, automated notifications can be used to educate patients about the benefits of early detection only available through mammography including statistics, success stories and testimonials. Notifications can also remind patients to bring friends or family members to screenings for support.

**KEEP THEM COMING BACK**

Women who consistently complete their annual mammogram screening can expect a 66% reduction in their risk of breast cancer over those who do not. If cancer is detected, these women can also see a 90% chance of breast cancer survival. However, of those who do begin mammogram screenings close to their 40th birthday, one in four never return for additional recommended annual screenings. Those that do return are sometimes waiting two or more years. Again, lack of reminders is cited as a major reason for noncompliance.

One survey showed that 60% of women over 40 could recall receiving a dental reminder within a 12-month period, 70% recalled a veterinary appointment reminder, but only 9% remembered receiving a reminder for their annual mammogram. Patients not only need to be reminded to start breast cancer screenings, they must also be reminded to continue screenings based on recommended guidelines in order to reduce risk and improve outcomes.

Early detection, prompt treatment and continuing care can reduce the severity and risk of complications from breast cancer. Mammography is the catalyst for positive breast cancer outcomes. Outreach to patients for starting and continuing annual mammogram screenings doesn’t have to be a tedious and costly task. Hundreds of automated notifications can be delivered instantly, any time of day, for pennies per contact. The proven effectiveness of these reminders in breast cancer screenings means more lives can be saved through widespread delivery.

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