

For Your Health Seeing Pink Is A Great Mammogram Reminder

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ALTON - If the pink popping up in store displays and across our screens hasn't given it away already, October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. And while it focuses on a serious disease, it's also an opportunity to highlight ways women can look after their breast health.

One of the most important things on that list: getting regular screening mammograms.

This is a message many women are used to hearing, but coming up on two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, it's also a message that's more important than ever.

Mammograms are a type of X-ray that help find breast cancer in earlier stages when it's easier to treat. With disruptions in health care and concerns about safety, especially in the pandemic's early months, many women missed their scheduled mammograms. And some have yet to get caught up.

It is known that keeping up with regular health care remains extremely important even during a pandemic, and most hospitals and screening facilities are back to their regular schedules and are taking steps to keep patients safe.

"If a woman is overdue for her mammogram, she should come in as soon as possible," said Dr. Debbie Bennett, chief of breast imaging at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. "Delays in screening can lead to delays in breast cancer diagnosis."

For the best chance of catching cancer early, most women should get a yearly mammogram starting at age 40.

Women who are at increased risk of breast cancer, because of factors like family history or medical history, may need to start screening earlier. And it's best to talk with a doctor about your breast cancer risk sometime in your 20s.

"Many of the strategies to prevent breast cancer, or catch it in its earlier stages, begin at a younger age for women who are at higher risk," Bennett said. "That's why it's important that women find out by age 30 whether they would benefit from screening or other tests in their 30s."

This can be particularly important for Black women, who are impacted unequally by breast cancer. Not only are Black women 40 percent more likely than white women to die of breast cancer, they also have the highest rate of developing the disease before age 40. Earlier screening, and other important care, in women at higher risk could help narrow such gaps.

To schedule a mammogram or get more information about screening, call your primary care provider, local hospital or screening facility. Some hospitals even offer mobile screening clinics, often called "mammography vans," which can set up in neighborhoods near you.

Most insurance plans cover mammograms, and many facilities take part in programs that can help provide free or low-cost tests for those who need it.

With the pandemic ongoing, it's important that women take time to look after their health, even as they have more on their plates than ever, Bennett said. And getting mammograms is a relatively quick and easy way of doing that.

“Screening mammograms are an important part of self-care,” she said. “We want to give all women the best chance of living long, healthy lives.”

To schedule a mammogram at Alton Memorial Hospital, please call 618-463-7647.

Dr. Graham A. Colditz, associate director of prevention and control at Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, is an internationally recognized leader in cancer prevention and the creator of YourDiseaseRisk.com, a free, personalized tool for helping people reduce the risk of cancer and other chronic diseases. An epidemiologist and public health expert, he has a long-standing interest in the preventable causes of disease. Colditz has a medical degree from The University of Queensland and a master's and doctoral degrees in public health from Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Alton Memorial Hospital is a member of the Siteman Cancer Network.