Is There Such A Thing As Too Much Cancer Detection?

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Results from a new study show that some older adults are being over screened for cancer. They are being screened when the test is not likely to provide an overall benefit. The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends that people get screened for cancer through ages 65-75 for most cancers. Being screened above these ages can do more harm than good. The screenings are less likely to provide an older population with benefits because our current screening tests usually identify slow-growing cancers. The patients are more likely to die from causes other than the cancer. Additionally, these screenings can give false positive results. That can lead to unnecessary tests and possibly expose patients to harmful side-effects.

To identify these trends, Dr. Moss and her colleagues used information collected in 2018 by the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a yearly national survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They found that up to 75% of older patients were screened after they passed the recommended ages for the tests. Surprisingly, they found that the overall health of the participants did not affect whether they were screened or not.

This study highlights the importance of informed decision making and communication between patients and doctors. According to Dr. Moss, both clinicians and patients need more education about the risks and benefits of cancer screening. This may result in difficult, but important, conservations between healthcare providers and older patients.

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