

Older women unaware of higher breast cancer risk

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Many older women, who are no longer routinely invited for breast screening, are not aware that increasing age is a major risk factor for the disease – according to a report published today in the British Journal of Cancer.

Researchers sent questionnaires to more than 700 British women aged between 67 and 73 to find out what they knew about breast cancer symptoms, their awareness of their personal risk of developing breast cancer and how confident they were of detecting any breast change.

They found that while 85 per cent of women recognised a lump as a sign of breast cancer, more than half the women failed to identify symptoms such as nipple rash, skin redness or a change in breast size.

Half the women thought the lifetime risk of developing breast cancer was one in 100 instead of one in nine. And 75 per cent did not know that the risk of developing breast cancer increased with age at all.

Professor Amanda Ramirez, director of the Cancer Research UK London psychosocial group and lead author of the report, will be presenting the results of the study at the National Cancer Research Institute's annual conference in Birmingham later today.

She said: "The lack of awareness about breast cancer among older women is especially serious as they are more at risk of breast cancer, more likely to delay going to the doctor with symptoms and also have poorer survival from the disease.

"Older women need to be equipped with the knowledge and confidence to detect breast changes and get them checked by a doctor.

"Because women are not invited for screening over the age of 70* it means that older women who have an increased risk of breast cancer are not routinely protected by the National Breast Screening Programme, although mammograms are available on request.

"It is important to remember that more than one in three breast symptoms in women over 65 are due to cancer, while only one in 10 symptoms in younger women are caused by cancer."

This study adds to the evidence that levels of cancer awareness in general are low in the UK. Mike Richards, the National Cancer Director and Harpal Kumar, the Chief Executive of Cancer Research UK are leading a new national initiative to improve cancer awareness and early diagnosis called NAEDI (National Awareness and Early Diagnosis Initiative).