Mammographic Density and the Risk and Detection of Breast Cancer
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Cancer turns up five times more often in women with extremely dense breast tissue than those with the most fatty tissue, a study shows, signaling the importance of a risk factor rarely discussed with patients. This Canadian study confirms that not only are tumors in women with dense breast tissue hidden on a mammogram but that cancers are also more frequent. Density is a true risk factor, along with other strong predictors such as age and the genes BRCA 1 and 2. Yet breast density is rarely considered with other risk factors in discussions with doctors and patients.

Dr. Norman Boyd, the study leader at Princess Hospital in Toronto said, "It's been ignored to an absolutely unbelievable degree." Breast density comes from the presence of more connective, duct-lining and milk-gland tissue than fat. A woman can't judge her own breast density but is routinely evaluated from a mammogram.

In this study, women with at least 75 percent dense breasts showed five times more likelihood of cancer than women with less than 10 percent density. Cancers were 18 times more likely to be found within the first year after a normal mammogram – the masking effect – since on mammograms dense tissue is light and tumors are light thus cancers are hidden.

Since dense tissue can mask tumors, the study authors suggest alternate imaging techniques be evaluated for women with extensive breast density.

Jeff Donn, The Associated Press January 18, 2007