

Breast Cancer Radiation Treatment May Increase Your Risk of Heart Disease

Heart disease is the number one killer of women. Traditionally, most women worry about breast cancer, ovarian cancer or uterine cancer as the primary cause of death. Surprisingly, a much greater percentage of women will die from heart disease. In fact, heart disease kills more women than all forms of cancer combined.

Did you know that having had breast cancer that was treated with radiation therapy could actually be increasing your risk of heart disease? A study published last year in the Journal of Clinical Oncology showed that nearly 1,000 women who had radiation treatments for left-sided breast cancer had a much greater risk of heart disease than women who had breast cancer treatments on the right chest. The study showed the women who had had breast cancer treatment (on the left side) with radiation during the late 1970's to the mid 1990's were found to have twice the risk of coronary artery disease (CAD) twenty years later after treatment. These women also had a much higher rate of chest pain, myocardial infarction, and cardiac death. Women who had high blood pressure were at even higher risk.

The study is very interesting because it is not looking at the usual concern that women have with breast cancer treatment; that the chemotherapy will damage the heart. We have known for years that Adriamycin can cause cardiomyopathy, a weakened heart muscle. Most of these patients develop congestive heart failure. We have also known that after initial radiation treatments, women can develop heart disease primarily with thickening of the pericardium or the sack around the heart. Now this study shows that the radiation treatment may affect coronary arteries which lead to coronary artery blockages and myocardial infarction.

So what can you do if you had radiation treatments twenty years ago? It is very important for you to know your coronary artery disease risk factors. They are: a strong family history of premature coronary disease, high blood pressure, abnormal blood cholesterol, smoking, metabolic syndrome, sedentary lifestyle, obesity, and age. Most women who have had breast cancer are not on hormone replacement therapy and are not smoking. Both of these things help reduce your risk for a heart attack.

The Heart Center for Women at St. Joseph's Hospital offers screening for early coronary artery disease by evaluating blood pressure, cholesterol, and screening tests to look for early atherosclerosis. Our nurse practitioner will spend time going through your medical history as well as discussing your individual lifestyle. After the screening examination, she will review with you these risk factors and talk to you about modifications that can be made to reduce your risk of heart disease. If there is enough concern over the test results, we would recommend that you see one of our St. Joseph's cardiologists who specialize in women with heart disease.

If you have been a breast cancer survivor and had radiation treatment nearly twenty years ago, you should know your risk factors for heart disease because having had radiation on the left breast could be one more risk factor. Talk to your primary care physician or your oncologist about this surprising new study. If you had radiation treatment to the left side of the chest, you have an increased risk of CAD, particularly if you have high blood pressure also.

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