

Fact Sheet: Women with disabilities and access to breast cancer screening



- Women with disabilities face numerous physical barriers to cancer screening, including mammogram machines and scales that require standing or specific positioning; inaccessible exam tables; lack of interpreters for hearing or vision impairments, or other different communication requirements; lack of information in alternative accessible formats; inaccessible washrooms; and unreliability of accessible transportation systems.ⁱ
- However, the most damaging barriers for women with disabilities are attitudinal barriers. For example health care providers often refuse to treat a woman with a disability or may provide treatment based on misinformation.ⁱⁱ
- Health care providers tend to medicalize and/or pathologize them, with the result that they are less likely to participate in regular screening.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Because people with disabilities frequently have limited access to education and/or low literacy rates, health promotion resources and campaigns are often ineffective for them.^{iv}
- As a result, women with disabilities are less likely than women without disabilities to receive pelvic and mammogram exams on a regular basis and are thus at a higher risk for delayed diagnosis of breast and cervical cancer.^v
- A 2011 study on breast cancer revealed that the rate of death for women with disabilities was higher than for those without disabilities even though both groups were treated for early breast cancer.^{vi}
- An Australian study revealed that women with intellectual disabilities are at a greater risk for leukemia, uterine and colorectal cancers.^{vii}

ⁱ Rajan, Doris. (2012). *Environmental Scan on Women with Disabilities and Breast Cancer Screening. Identified Problems, Strategies, and Recommended Next Steps*. Canadian Breast Cancer Network.

ⁱⁱ Barile, M. (2004). *Access to breast cancer screening programs for women with disabilities*. Montréal, Qc: Action des femmes handicapées de Montréal et l'Équipe Cancer de la Direction de santé publique-Montréal-Centre.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} Ouellette-Kuntz, H. (2005). *Understanding health disparities and inequalities faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities* [Electronic version]. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 18, 113–121.

^v Nosek, M.A. and Howland, C.A. (1997) "Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Among Women with Physical Disabilities" Elsevier Inc - Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. Volume 78, Issue 12, Supplement 5, Pages S39-S44.

^{vi} Disaboom Health Team (2011). *Breast Cancer and People with Disabilities: A Deadly Combination*. Disaboom.

^{vii} www.disaboom.com.

^{viii} Sullivan, S.G., Hussain, R., Threlfall, T., Bittles, A.H. (2004) *The Incidences of Cancer in People with Intellectual Disabilities*. Perth Australia: Centre for Human Genetics, Edith Cowan University.