What Should I Know About Stopping Routine Cancer Screening?

What Is Cancer Screening?
Cancer screening is a test performed on people without symptoms to detect certain types of cancer. For example, screening mammography looks for breast cancer. Guidelines on when to start and stop cancer screening are based on evidence from clinical studies of the benefits and harms of screening; the age at which specific cancers tend to occur, how fast cancers progress, and personal health factors. Screening tests are repeated at specific intervals. The recommended interval depends on age, medical history, family history, the type of test performed, and the results of previous screening tests. Only certain types of cancer have approved screening tests.

What Are the Benefits of Cancer Screening?
The goal of cancer screening is to prevent death from cancer through early detection. Some cancers may be more easily treated or curable if discovered early. Some cancer screening tests may reduce the risk of death due to cancer. For most screening tests, the reduced risk of cancer-related death is small. Most types of cancer screening have not been shown to prolong life overall.

What Are the Harms of Cancer Screening?
Cancer screening tests are not perfect. Test results may suggest cancer when there is none (false-positive screen). They can also miss cancer even if it is present (false-negative screen). False-positive results can lead to emotional stress and more testing without improving health. Screening tests may also lead to overdiagnosis. Overdiagnosis is when screening tests find slow-growing forms of cancer that would never have caused symptoms or affected health if left undetected. Overdiagnosis can lead to emotional stress and unnecessary and potentially harmful testing and treatment. Other harms are associated with undergoing certain cancer screening tests. For example, radiation from computed tomographic scans to screen for lung cancer can slightly increase cancer risk. Screening tests such as colonoscopy may cause bleeding, pain, or complications from anesthesia.

Why Should I Stop Routine Cancer Screening?
As people age, the risk of getting life-threatening forms of certain cancers decreases. The risk of serious adverse effects from some cancer screening tests increases. Many cancers, including breast and colon cancers, tend to be less aggressive and grow more slowly in older persons. Early detection of these cancers is less likely to benefit people after a certain age or if someone has a serious medical illness. Many research studies on cancer screening have not included people older than 75 years. There is no strong evidence that the benefits of screening outweigh the harms in this group.

How Do I Decide When It Is Time to Stop Routine Cancer Screening?
The decision to stop routine cancer screening is often based on age and health status. Each cancer screening test includes an age cutoff. Often this age is 75 years. After this age, screening is no longer recommended for most people. People with life-limiting medical conditions may stop cancer screening earlier than age 75 years. Continued screening beyond the recommended age cutoff may be considered for people who are likely to maintain good health for at least 10 years. However, even among healthy adults older than 75 years, there is no strong evidence that continuing cancer screening prevents death or improves quality of life. It is important to balance scientific evidence, individual values, and input from your health care professional to make the best personal decision.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
National Cancer Institute

University of Utah Health
https://healthcare.utah.edu/the-scope/shows.php?shows=l_mex665mg

University of California, San Francisco
https://eprognosis.ucsf.edu/decision_aids.php

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