

## **Their Findings Were Not of Statistical Significance**

**“But my name is not ‘Statistical’ and I am Significant!”**

**Or**

### **Should Women Stop HT Temporarily Before Undergoing Screening Mammography?**

*Last year the radiologist told me that taking hormone therapy makes my breasts denser. Should I stop my hormones for several weeks before my mammogram?*

Hormone therapy is associated with higher breast density. It's one of the reasons that women who take hormones have 'perkier girls'. Nonetheless, some experts have suggested that mammograms will be more accurate if women will stop the hormones for a month or two before their mammograms.

About 10% of women who undergo screening mammography are requested to return for more studies. Of course, this causes these women to feel anxious. It not only disrupts their sleep but also their schedule. In addition, the insurance companies are not pleased with the added costs associated with more procedures. More than 95% of the time the additional studies do not indicate the findings of breast cancer.

A government sponsored study located women who were using hormone therapy during the preceding year when their last mammograms were performed and were still taking hormones when it was time for their next annual study. The grand plan was to ask these women to stop the hormone therapy for 1-2 months to see if it was easier to interpret the mammogram results, resulting in fewer women having to return for additional costly studies.

The first hurdle that had to be overcome was to convince the women to stop their hormone therapy. Of the almost 5000 women who were contacted, nearly 66 percent refused to stop their hormone therapy. The women who agreed to participate in the study were assigned to one of three groups: those required to stop their therapy for 1 month, those required to stop their therapy for 2 months and those who could continue their hormones. All three groups proceeded with their mammograms.

Very interestingly, nothing really changed. The recall rates were similar in the women who continued their hormones (11%), 1-month suspension (12%), and 2-month suspension (10%). The breasts of the women who did stop their hormones

were less dense, but these changes in density did not affect mammography recall rates.

The greatest difference noted in the groups of women who stopped their hormone therapy were the significantly higher rates of hot flashes that were reported by about half of women when the study began and increased to more than 85% of the women who agreed to stop their hormone therapy.

**Comment:** Three important points can be garnered from this study:

1. Most women are not going to stop their hormones for a government study.
2. Stopping your hormone therapy for 1 to 2 months before your mammogram will *not* lessen your chances of having to return for follow-up studies.
3. Stopping your hormones will dramatically increase the likelihood of hot flashes.