

Cancer Trials Report Reveals Disconcerting Trend for Elderly

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People over age 65 make up 20 percent of our country's population and, of that segment, women in general are living longer lives, but not necessarily high quality or better ones. Women are plagued with higher rates of chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes. Yet much of what we know about those diseases has come from studies of men younger than 70. Researchers are working to fill this gap in our knowledge and to do that they need women volunteers for their clinical studies.

But a report in the June 9, 2004, issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association on cancer clinical trials enrollment shows older Americans, specifically women, have not heeded the call to participate in research studies. As the number of older Americans grows and life expectancy for women increases, sex and gender specific information about disease prevention, diagnosis and treatment will be essential for the health of this population.

While overall enrollment rates in cancer trials have increased by 50 percent from 1996 to 2002, participation by the elderly and specifically women has remained at a virtual standstill since the mid-1990s. The elderly make up about two-thirds of patients with either breast, colorectal, prostate or lung cancer, yet they represented only one-third of clinical trial participants.

Medical research is the link between disease and cure and, for many Americans, the hope for future good health. Unfortunately, this latest report signals the message has not resonated with older Americans.

For women, who were historically underrepresented in clinical-trial research, it is critical that they are aware of the powerful contribution they can offer in the effort to understand health and treat disease. As we learn more about the biological differences between women and men, we uncover the secrets of many diseases and why they and the treatments designed to stop them affect people differently. The result is improved treatments that meet the need of every segment of the population, regardless of sex, age or ethnicity.

Nearly every woman qualifies for a medical research study at some time in her life. Even perfectly healthy people may participate in observational studies and Phase I clinical trials. If a woman is currently healthy, but at risk for a disease, she may qualify for a prevention study. And if a woman is sick, she may want to consider entering a clinical trial to test an investigational treatment.

Each medical research study is carefully designed to answer particular questions. Part of the design, known as the protocol, includes deciding what particular qualities a person must have in order to qualify for the study. Examples of these qualifiers includes a person's age, whether she has the disease or risk of disease that is being studied, whether she has other diseases or conditions, whether she is taking other medications, and so on. If a woman decides to volunteer for a study, the first step will be for the research coordinator to determine if she qualifies. Often, studies have very limited qualifications and, if a woman doesn't qualify, there will likely be other opportunities to volunteer.

To find out about more about when, where and how you can participate in clinical trials research, talk to your health care providers or call 1-877-332-2636. This is a toll free phone number for the Society's public education campaign on clinical trials called "Some Things Only a Woman Can Do." Materials are available in English and Spanish and special information for women over 65 is available. There's also a Web site: www.WomanCanDo.org.

A 2003 survey by the Society for Women's Health Research found that most women 50 and older who had participated in a medical research study would likely take part in a study again.

Including research subjects of both sexes, all ages, races and ethnicities in medical studies is critical to gaining a better understanding of how to prevent and treat diseases in diverse populations and also for eliminating health disparities. Participants have the opportunity to impact the health care of themselves, their families and future generations.

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