

H.R. 1740 and S. 994
The Breast Cancer Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young Act
Myths and Facts on the “EARLY Act”

The EARLY Act calls for the CDC to conduct a national evidence-based education campaign to increase education and awareness regarding the threats posed by breast cancer to young women of all racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It asks the CDC to convene an advisory committee of experts in the field to assist in designing the campaign for both young women and medical professionals. The bill also establishes a grant program for groups that assist young women diagnosed with breast cancer with the unique challenges they face. The legislation is a public health information and awareness bill -- not a science research bill. Several additional “myths” about the bill are discussed below.

Myth: We do not have any knowledge of risk factors, methods of early detection or understanding of genetics.

Fact: Experts know plenty about specific risks, and early warning signs. For specific risks, experts know that certain ethnicities have increased risks of breast cancer, increased risks of genetic mutations that can cause breast cancer, and increased risks of having more aggressive forms of breast cancer. Educating women to know their specific risks and to discuss them with their personal medical provider helps arm women with knowledge.

Myth: The legislation mandates genetic counseling and testing for all women.

Fact: The EARLY Act does not advocate or mandate genetic counseling for all women. Rather, where there is an increased risk based on race, ethnicity or other factors, it encourages women to be aware of these increased risks, and talk to their medical providers about the availability of genetic counseling and testing. The campaign will also educate providers on how to talk to women about these risks and on when to refer patients to health care providers with genetic expertise.

Myth: Education and awareness of women under 40 will simply scare them and do more harm than good.

Fact: Education and awareness is empowering because it teaches younger women to learn the facts, know their body, speak up for their health, and embrace support. The EARLY Act directs the CDC and an expert advisory panel to educate younger women to their specific risk factors, be more aware of changes in their bodies and when to talk to their medical provider about possible changes, know what questions to ask of their medical providers, know how to locate experts in risk assessment, and know that support is available for those younger women that are diagnosed with breast cancer.

Myth: Breast cancer is “so rare” in women under 40 that a public education and awareness campaign is not warranted.

Fact: Young women can and do get breast cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates that 10,000 women under the age of 40 will get breast cancer each year, and 28,000 under the age of 45. In addition, although the incidence of young women with breast cancer is much lower than in older women, young women’s breast cancers are generally more aggressive and result in lower survival rates. Increasing awareness of the potential risks and knowing to consult their medical professional and knowing what questions they should ask is critical. However, while the legislation will help younger women who do get breast cancer, it will also help all women become aware of their risks throughout their lifetime. Education, and educating early and often, is a good thing.

Myth: The legislation promotes breast self exam as an early detection tool.

Fact: The EARLY Act incorporates the advice of the 2009 NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology of using breast self exams as a method for facilitating breast self awareness. Breast self awareness can help women detect changes that may be early warning signs of breast cancer, like lumps, swelling, a rash, breast pain, nipple pain, redness or scaliness. The NCCN guidelines state that, “Women should be familiar with their breasts and promptly report changes to their healthcare provider. Periodic, consistent BSE may facilitate breast self awareness. Premenopausal women may find BSE most informative when performed at the end of menses.” The guidelines recommend BSE for women of all risk categories, of any age, 20 years old and up. A 2007 report by the Journal of Clinical Oncology found that breast self-exam is the most common method of breast cancer identification, with 75% of first detection coming from BSE.

Myth: The legislation promotes invasive, prophylactic surgeries.

Fact: The EARLY Act does not advocate for any specific intervention. Rather, it encourages women to know their personal risk factors, and to discuss those risks and potential risk reduction strategies with qualified medical practitioners. It also provides support to women diagnosed with breast cancer in coping with the disease and its effects.

Myth: All efforts to combat breast cancer should be focused on medical research.

Fact: While medical research, and increased funding for medical research is critically important -- and something Congress supports -- we can also address the public health education and support needs of the thousands of young women diagnosed with breast cancer each year and empower all women with knowledge and awareness of their personal risks over the course of their lifetime.

Myth: The bill mandates specific medical advice and scientific information that must be given to young women, and does so in an irresponsible way.

Fact: It is true that messages to a younger population to raise awareness and knowledge must be done in a careful, responsible manner. That is why the EARLY Act puts the evidence-based education campaign in the hands of experts. The bill instructs the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and its public health team, to work with an advisory committee of breast cancer specialists in the fields of prevention, diagnosis, genetic screening and counseling, treatment, and rehabilitation. These experts will craft specific messages and materials that are evidence-based and age-appropriate to empower women to learn the facts about breast cancer, know their bodies, speak up for their health, and embrace support.