

Do higher cancer rates reflect better detection?

■ CANCER

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The report found that white women in San Francisco, San Mateo County and the East Bay had breast cancer rates about 13 percent higher than the nationwide annual average of 114 per 100,000. Rates for white women in the South Bay, lower Peninsula, Santa Cruz and Monterey areas were about even with the nationwide average.

The picture was different, however, for minority women in most geographical areas. Breast cancer rates were generally lower than those of white women — except for black women in the South Bay, who had slightly higher rates than white women.

The lower rates for most minority women were not necessarily good news, because it could mean fewer are getting mammograms and exams that would detect their cancer early. "Once they get cancer, they tend to have lower survival rates," said Dr. Robert Hiatt, a principal scientist on the report. The reason may be that a significant number of minority women have lower incomes and aren't always able to get medical care quickly.

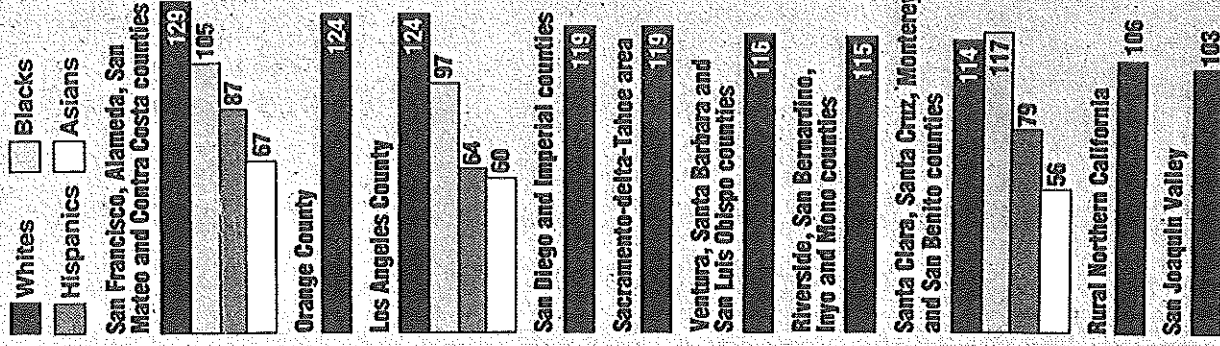
While better detection is probably the most important reason for higher breast cancer rates in San Francisco, West also suggested two other possible factors: Women there may delay having children longer than other women, and they may eat a higher-fat diet.

In general, West explained, breast cancer is more common among affluent women who have more education, perhaps because they delay childbearing while establishing their careers. "There's some evidence that delayed childbearing does increase the risk," he said.

Previous studies have suggested that getting pregnant and bearing a child interrupts a woman's routine hormonal cycle. Women who postpone childbearing or who don't have children experience a longer period of uninterrupted hormonal cycles that may increase breast cancer risk.

Breast cancer rates

White women in the central Bay Area had the state's highest breast cancer rate per 100,000 population for 1988-'91.



Source: California Cancer Registry, Northern California Cancer Center

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