

CONTENTS

Improved Care Needed for Patients Receiving Heart-Toxic Drugs

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Patients who receive cancer drugs that can damage the heart may not be getting the care they need, according to a study presented at the annual scientific meeting of the American College of Cardiology in March.

The study looked at 88 breast cancer, leukemia, and lymphoma patients treated at a single institution with either anthracyclines (for example, Adriamycin [doxorubicin]), Herceptin (trastuzumab), or a combination of the two. Eleven patients already had a poorly functioning heart prior to cancer treatment.

A total of 36 patients (includes those with or without symptoms) had their heart function decline during or after treatment, and of those patients, only half received drugs for treating heart failure and/or referral to a cardiologist.

Given the small sample of patients and the definition of left ventricular dysfunction as an ejection fraction of less than 55 percent as opposed to the more conventional 50 percent, experts say the take-home message is that oncologists and cardiologists need to develop a consensus on how to monitor for and treat heart damage in cancer patients. Currently, the value of using medications for treatment-induced left ventricular dysfunction without symptoms present, as well as newer blood tests for early detection of this problem, remains unknown.

Read more about protecting your heart from the side effects of treatment in "[Hazardous to Your Heart](#)" from the Spring 2007 issue.