Purpose: The purpose of this systematic literature review is to analyze and synthesize research studies focusing on mammography and Pap smear utilization in obese women. The specific aims of this study were to determine if obese women are at increased risk of underutilizing cervical and breast cancer screening processes, and to explore the causative reasons behind the statistical trends.

Method: A systematic literature review was conducted using the CINAHL, Medline, PubMed, and Google Scholar databases. Keywords utilized included obesity, BMI, body mass index, women, obese women, cervical cancer, breast cancer, cancer, mammogram, mammography, Pap smear, screening, and incidence. The articles were screened by title and abstract, for the following inclusion criteria: (1) published between 1995 and 2012, (2) focused on populations of obese women and health care providers in developed nations, (3) focused on either Pap smear utilization, mammography utilization, or both in obese women, (4) conducted in age appropriate populations, (5) published in reputable research journals, and (6) written or translated into English. The reference lists of included studies were also hand-searched in order to find additional research articles missed by the electronic databases. A total of 17 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included in the analysis.

Findings: The synthesized data suggests that there is an inverse relationship between increasing body mass index (BMI) and cervical and breast cancer screening adherence, with severely obese women (obese class III) being the most likely to underutilize Pap smear and mammography screening. Research regarding breast and cervical cancer screening utilization among obese minority women has been inconclusive.

Conclusions: Although there is strong quantitative evidence supporting the link between obesity and decreased breast and cervical cancer screening in obese women, there has not been significant qualitative research devoted to analyzing causative reasons behind the statistical trends. Further research is also needed to analyze breast and cervical cancer screening utilization in obese minority women. Researchers should develop interventions and strategies focused on improving breast and cervical cancer screening adherence in obese women.