

Unhealthy Lifestyle Prevails in Young Breast Cancer Patients Lifestyle Change and Regular Breast Health Check Help

(HONG KONG- 19 Sep 2012) The latest statistics of the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry, initiated by the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation (HKBCF), revealed that lifestyle-related factors such as insufficient physical exercise and a stressful life were prevalent in breast cancer patients aged under 40. These factors are known to increase the risk of breast cancer. HKBCF advises adult women yet to reach 40 to be “Breast Aware” and to reduce breast cancer risk by adopting healthier lifestyle choices and practicing monthly breast self-examination and a clinical breast examination every 3 years (women aged 40 or above are advised to form a habit for regular bi-annual mammography breast screening).

Today HKBCF released the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry Report No. 4 with data analysis on 7,241 local breast cancer cases. In Hong Kong, most breast cancers are diagnosed in women aged between 40 and 59. In the cohort captured in Report No.4, 14% of the patients were diagnosed before they were 40 years old (“young patients”).

The cause of breast cancer is unclear but there are risk factors known to increase one’s chance of getting breast cancer. **Dr Polly Cheung, Chairman of the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry (BCR) Steering Committee** stated that the 10 most common risk factors for breast cancer in patients can be grouped into two categories: lifestyle-related (L) or hormone-related (H) (Table 1). Lifestyle-related risk factors such as lack of exercise (85%), high level of stress in life (46%) and meat-rich diets (20%) were prevalent in young patients. Also prevailing among young patients were factors that affect one’s hormone exposure, including the absence of childbirth and breastfeeding experience or early menarche. In the older patient group (40-70 years old and above 70), overweight/obesity was common (38%).

The International Agency for Research on Cancer, part of World Health Organization has identified working night shift as a probable human carcinogen. The BCR has been collecting this data from registrants since its inception. In the current cohort, 9% of those who were employed worked with the requirement to do night shifts. Further studies are required to examine the detailed impact of nightshift on Hong Kong women in relation to breast cancer risk.

Table 1 Breast cancer risk factors among patients (N=7,241)

	Risk factor	Overall %	<40 %	40-70 %	>70 %
1.	Lack of exercise (<3 hours a week) (L)	75	<u>85</u>	74	59
2.	No experience of breastfeeding (H)	63	75	69	29
3.	High level of stress (L)	37	<u>46</u>	37	11
4.	Overweight/obesity (BMI>23) (L)	36	24	38	38
5.	No childbirth (H)	21	43	18	11
6.	Family history of breast cancer	15	18	15	11
7.	Meat-rich diet (L)	14	<u>20</u>	13	8
8.	Menarche before age 12 (H)	13	20	13	2
9.	Use of hormone therapy (N=3,522) (H)	11	N/A	13	4
10.	Working night shifts (N=4,161) (L)	9	11	9	10

Low Take-up Rate of Breast Cancer Screening

Dr Cheung cited analyses in Report No.4 and said that the overall rates of breast cancer screening in patients were low. HKBCF recommends women aged 40-70 to take a mammogram screening every other year in order to detect possible breast lump before it becomes large enough to be felt. However, the overall mammography-screening rate for patients in the cohort was as low as 26%. The rate of screen-detected breast cancer was only 7% in the patients, compared to the rate of about 50% in the U.S.

The Report also indicates that the breast cancer cases detected through routine screening were mostly stages 0 or I (68%), while most of the self-detected cases were stage II (45%) at the time of diagnosis. The rate of advanced stages (III & IV) for screen-detected cases and self-detected cases were 5.6% and 16.3% respectively.

Women aged below 40 are yet to start regular mammography screening. Dr Cheung, nonetheless, advised, 'Young women below 40 should be Breast Aware, meaning they should be alert at all times to unusual changes in their breasts. In the cohort of Report No. 4, 90% of the patients who found their breast cancer by chance were prompted by painless lumps.'

More Aggressive Cancer and Higher Chemo Rates in Young Patients

Professor Winnie Yeo, member of the BCR Steering Committee, said that the differences in cancer characteristics between young and older patients noted in Report No. 4 were in line with overseas statistics. “The data showed the older the patient, the larger the tumour. Young patients, however, are more likely to have breast cancer with more aggressive biological features. Recognised prognostic factors such as the rates of grade 3 tumours, presence of lymphovascular invasion and Ki-67 index of >14% (indicating the rapid growth of cancer cells) were more common in young patients than in older patients.”

On treatment, the rate of breast conserving surgery was higher among young patients, whose treatment combinations were more complicated. No stage 0 breast cancer patients underwent chemotherapy; about 40% of stage I patients had chemotherapy while as high as 84-94% of stage II-IV patients received chemotherapy. The rates of chemotherapy were the highest among the young patient group across all cancer stages. In addition, the rates of triple-negative breast cancer and multi-focality were also higher in young patients. Patients aged over 70 had higher rates of oestrogen receptor positive.

Young Patients Tend to Change Lifestyle after Diagnosis

Older Patients Tend to Suppress Negative Emotions

On the psychological impact of breast cancer on patients, young patients were observed to be less likely to accept the diagnoses calmly or positively, and were more likely to worry about recurrence sometimes or at all times. However, the rates of lifestyle adjustment after diagnosis were higher in young patients. Overall, most of the patients changed dietary habit (71%) and did more exercise (59%). Of the 4,146 patients who had an occupation at diagnosis, 12 % quit afterwards.

Mrs Eliza Fok, Chairman, HKBCF, said women aged below 40 had a long life journey ahead. They are mostly at work or taking care of their family and are at the golden age of family or career development. Breast cancer does not only affect their health, but also impacts their family, fertility and the productivity of society at large. “In view of the unique needs of young patients, the HKBCF has started a support group for patients under 40 last year. The professional-led support group allows patients to share knowledge and support from peers and has been very much in demand.’, Mrs Fok also encouraged all to be attentive to the health and wellbeing of our mothers and to arrange for them to take regular breast health checks even if they are over 70, as elderly patients usually had larger tumours according to Report No. 4.

Young breast cancer survivor, Ms Teresa Tam shared at the press conference the hard times she endured accepting the diagnosis at 30's. Despite an early detection, she still had to go through various therapies after a surgery, including hormonal therapy that has negative impact on her fertility. She had considered herself fit before the diagnosis as her diet was healthy and she worked out regularly. She did not realise that stress might harm her health. "I was too conscious about how I was perceived. I wanted to be perfect and suppressed my negative emotions. I thought I was capable of handling things well." She encouraged young women to be aware of their psychological wellbeing and young patients to seek appropriate support. "Our family may not know what we are going through because they have never experienced the disease. But in the patient support group at HKBCF, you'll obtain all the tips and experience sharing from peers. That really boosted my confidence a lot."

Photo captions:



Dr Polly Cheung (left one) and Professor Winnie Yeo of Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry Steering Committee along with Eliza Fok, Chairman of Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation and young survivor Teresa Tam revealed the data analyses of the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry Report No. 4.



Stressful and inactive lifestyle, and late childbirth are all risk factors for breast cancer prevalent in young women, said Dr Polly Cheung.



Teresa Tam, who was diagnosed with breast cancer at 34, said many young survivors like her were concerned with the loss of fertility during the 5-year hormonal therapy treatment.