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Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry Report No.18

Similarities and Differences Between Screen-detected and Symptom-detected Breast Cancer

Mammography Saves Lives

【Hong Kong, 29 September 2026】 The Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry (HKBCR), run by the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation (HKBCF), today published the **Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry Report No.18**. Research shows that breast cancer patients diagnosed mainly through mammography (MMG) screening have significantly better tumour characteristics, treatment patterns, and survival outcomes compared to those diagnosed after presenting symptoms, underscoring that mammography screening effectively reduces the threat of breast cancer to life.

Dr. Polly CHEUNG, Founder of the HKBCF and Specialist in General Surgery, emphasised: "The findings of this study aim to address the evidence gap in the usefulness of local breast cancer screening and provide local evidence data to healthcare providers and policymakers to support the expansion of regular MMG screening, ensuring that all eligible women across Hong Kong can benefit."

Nearly Two Decades of Breast Cancer Data, Establishing a Representative Registry

Established in 2007, the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry is approaching its 20th anniversary. As a member of the International Association of Cancer Registries (IACR) under the World Health Organisation, the HKBCR has enrolled over 34,000 breast cancer patients and survivors to date, providing a vital foundation for local breast cancer research and surveillance.

Dr. Chun-Chung YAU, Vice Chairman of the HKBCF and Specialist in Clinical Oncology, stated: "Through the HKBCR, the public gains deeper insights into breast cancer, mastering its top ten risk factors and clinical characteristics. Years of data indicate that the

proportions of breast-conserving surgery, neoadjuvant chemotherapy, and sentinel lymph node biopsies have continuously risen, reflecting a trend toward more precise and personalised clinical treatments. Post-treatment studies on physical and mental well-being, recurrence risks, and survival outcomes further highlight the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the HKBCR."

Lower Proportion of Late-Stage Breast Cancer in the Screen-Detected Group

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in Hong Kong. In 2023, Hong Kong recorded 5,585 new cases of invasive breast cancer and 831 cases of carcinoma in situ.¹ This study retrieved breast cancer cases involving women aged 18 to 80 diagnosed between 2011 and 2015 from the HKBCR, with a total of 6,942 patients eligible for analysis. Among them, 733 asymptomatic women were diagnosed via screening ("screen-detected group"), while 6,209 were in the "symptom-detected group", which were diagnosed via diagnostic imaging after presenting with breast-related symptoms, such as a palpable lump.

In the screen-detected group, the proportion of late-stage (Stage III to IV) breast cancer was only 3.3%, far lower than the 21.1% observed in the symptom-detected group, proving that regular mammography screening effectively detects breast cancer early. Because mammography can detect non-palpable abnormalities, including microcalcifications, patients in the screen-detected group presented with smaller tumours and lower rates of lymph node involvement compared to those in the symptom-detected group. Furthermore, the screen-detected group had a higher prevalence of HR+HER2- breast cancer, whereas the symptom-detected group had a higher proportion of the more aggressive triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC).

Higher Rate of Breast-Conserving Surgery and Lower Rate of Chemotherapy in the Screen-Detected Group

Regarding treatment modalities, the rate of breast-conserving surgery in the screen-detected group was over 70% higher than that in the symptom-detected group (56.6% vs. 32.6%). Additionally, the proportion of patients requiring chemotherapy in the screen-detected group was approximately 60% lower than in the symptom-detected group (25.3% vs. 65.7%).

¹ Hong Kong Cancer Registry, Hospital Authority. Female Breast Cancer in 2023. Published August 2025. Accessed August 25, 2026. https://www3.ha.org.hk/cancereg/pdf/factsheet/2023/breast_2023.pdf

Prof. Rina HUI, Member of the HKBCF Registry Steering Committee and Director of the Centre of Cancer Medicine at the University of Hong Kong, stated: "Most patients in the screen-detected group were diagnosed at early stages, making them better candidates for breast-conserving surgery and reduced need for chemotherapy. Even if a mastectomy was needed, the likelihood of needing radiotherapy and chemotherapy is reduced if there is no lymph node involvement. Mammography screening helps enable less invasive surgery and systemic treatments, which not only improves overall 10-year survival rates but also lowers treatment costs."

Based on overall survival estimates using the Kaplan-Meier method, the screen-detected group demonstrated an absolute overall survival benefit 13.7% higher than the symptom-detected group at 10 years (88.0% vs. 74.3%), as well as a superior 10-year breast cancer-specific survival rate. These advantages were particularly pronounced among Stage I breast cancer patients, where the increase in survival rate even surpassed that achieved by newly developed, costly breast cancer drugs in recent years. This highlights regular screening as the primary goal in breast cancer prevention and control.

Early-Stage Breast Cancer Shows No Symptoms

Prof. Emily Chan, Honorary Advisor of the HKBCF, is an internationally renowned public health and humanitarian expert who has spent decades working on the frontlines and teaching at universities. Although her mother passed away from breast cancer, she is not a carrier of genetic mutations. Despite a demanding career, she maintained regular breast cancer screenings over the past 20 years until a routine check-up in January this year revealed breast cancer. She recalled: "I felt no lump, had no bleeding, and experienced no pain. If I hadn't gone for regular mammograms every 12 to 18 months, I would have had no idea." She expressed deep gratitude for detecting it early and receiving timely treatment.

Ms. NG, in her 60s, has undergone regular mammography screenings for over two decades. In December 2025, screening detected unusual calcifications in her breast, which further examination confirmed as Stage 0 breast cancer. In January this year, she underwent a right mastectomy. She noted that she was completely asymptomatic prior to diagnosis and that her cancer type was relatively fast-spreading. "Fortunately, I had the habit of regular screening, so it was detected very early. I didn't need chemotherapy or radiotherapy, nor do I need long-term medication post-surgery, which spared me considerable emotional and financial stress."

She hopes the government will implement population-wide breast cancer screening so that citizens without regular screening habits can also have the opportunity to detect breast cancer early.

Mammography Screening Reduces Treatment Costs

According to 2025 government statistics, there are approximately 2.7 million women aged 40 or above in Hong Kong, a number projected to rise continuously with an ageing population. Breast cancer screening not only protects their health but also helps reduce overall healthcare costs. A retrospective study examining 15,144 eligible participants from the HKBCR between 2006 and 2018 revealed that average breast cancer treatment costs per patient diagnosed via mammography screening were 28.4% lower compared to self-detection. The study estimated that for a cohort of 100,000 women starting mammography screening at age 40, long-term savings in treatment costs could reach up to HK\$770 million.²

Dr. Polly CHEUNG noted that over 40 countries worldwide have implemented population-wide breast cancer screening programmes, achieving participation rates between 50% and 80%. In contrast, to further promote local mammography screening in Hong Kong, key priorities beyond public education include public-private partnerships and streamlined participation procedures. Furthermore, establishing an adequate number of quality-assured screening centers that offer affordable and accessible high-quality services is essential to ensure low-income women can also participate with peace of mind.

The HKSAR Government launched Phase I and Phase II of its risk-based Breast Cancer Screening Pilot Programme in September 2021 and June 2025, respectively, providing mammography screening services to women with general and moderate risk, and high risk. The HKBCF hopes that the government will in the future further introduce a territory-wide breast cancer screening program covering all eligible women. Meanwhile, the HKBCF will continue to offer free and subsidised breast screening quotas and collaborate with District Health Centres, women's health service units, and other community partners. Through referral and collaboration arrangements, women in need can access convenient mammography screening and follow-up support, jointly advancing community-based breast cancer screening services.

² Hao Z, Lam A, Hu Y, Lee C, Yeo W, Kwok C, et al. Real-world evidence of mammography screening from the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry: a cost minimisation analysis of 15 144 patients with breast cancer. *BMJ Public Health*. 2026;4:e004452. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjph-2025-004452>

Dr. Eliza FOK, Chairman of the HKBCF, urged women to pay attention to their breast health daily and recommended that women aged 40 or above undergo clinical examinations and mammograms every two years, emphasising that early detection is the key to effective treatment.

About the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation

Established on 8 March, 2005, the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation is the city's first non-profit charitable organisation dedicated to breast health screening and education, patient support, research and advocacy. It is committed to mitigating the threat of breast cancer in Hong Kong. Its mission is to raise public awareness of breast cancer, promote the importance of breast health, support patients on their road to recovery, and advocate for enhanced breast cancer prevention and healthcare policies in Hong Kong.

About the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry

Established in 2007 under the HKBCF, the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry is approaching its 20th anniversary and is a member of the International Association of Cancer Registries (IACR) under the World Health Organisation. To date, 34,724 breast cancer patients and survivors have registered, contributing personal and medical history data for analysis and research. It stands as Hong Kong's most comprehensive and representative breast cancer database and surveillance system.

Media Enquiry:

Hilary Law Tel: 3143 7357 / 9304 2477

Email: hilarylau@hkbcf.org

Winnie Wong Tel: 3143 7360 / 9446 1636

Email: winniewong@hkbcf.org