

80 over 50

Summary

Eighty per cent of breast cancer cases in the UK are diagnosed in women over the age of 50 years. However, a recent survey undertaken by Breast Cancer Care and Boots in July 2003 shows that many older women are not aware that their risk of developing breast cancer significantly increases with age. The survey also found that many older women are not confident that they know what breast changes to report to their GP and a significant number never check their breasts.

These findings highlight an urgent need to improve breast awareness amongst older women. To support this aim Breast Cancer Care is launching an '80 over 50' campaign, which aims to raise breast awareness in older women. We are also calling on the Department of Health and the NHS Breast Screening Programme to review their breast cancer health education and information strategy to ensure that the right messages are getting to the right people at the right time. This is particularly important in view of the ageing population in the UK.

Introduction

Over the last few years Breast Cancer Care has become increasingly concerned about public misconceptions around age related risk of breast cancer. In particular we are worried that many older women (50+ years) are unaware that their risk of breast cancer increases with age.

In the UK, 20 per cent of breast cancer cases are diagnosed in women under the age of 50. Therefore it is very important that younger women are breast aware. However, with 80 per cent of breast cancer cases being diagnosed in women over the age of 50 it is especially important that this age group is informed that they are at increased risk and of the need to be breast aware.

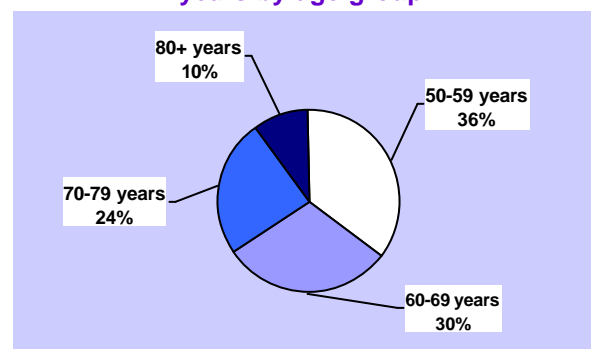
Breast Cancer Care is aware that media portrayal of breast cancer often focuses on younger women, which may increase misconceptions that breast cancer is a younger women's disease. In a 2002 Breast Cancer Care survey (IPSOS, 2002) 42 per cent of women said that they obtained most of their information about breast cancer from their GP surgery. However, 25 per cent said newspapers and magazines and 22 per cent said television were their major sources of information about breast cancer. This demonstrates the powerful role the media has to play in disseminating health information.

In an attempt to address misconceptions around age-related risk Breast Cancer Care is launching a new campaign - '80 over 50' - which is part of our 2003 Breast Cancer Awareness Month activities. It aims to ensure that older women are correctly informed about their risk of breast cancer and to encourage them to be more breast aware. In turn greater breast awareness should aid early detection and lead to improved treatment outcomes.

To inform this campaign Breast Cancer Care, in association with Boots, commissioned a survey to examine understanding of breast cancer and awareness of risk in women with no prior personal experience of breast cancer. (The survey is a follow-up of two previous breast awareness surveys undertaken by Breast Cancer Care and Boots in 1997 and 2002.)

A total of 922 women aged 18-99 years participated in the survey and 414 of these were aged over 50. The data was collected in a series of interviews conducted during June-July 2003 via Ipsos-UK in-home face-to-face CAPI omnibus (Capibus).

Proportion of women interviewed over 50 years by age group



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This briefing will discuss how the results of the survey demonstrate the need for an improved breast cancer awareness strategy for older women.

Survey results

Knowledge about breast cancer

A quarter of the women who participated in the survey said that they did not feel they knew much about breast cancer. Interestingly, this is a higher percentage than our 1997 and 2002 surveys when 16 per cent and 20 per cent respectively reported that they did not know a lot about breast cancer. This is concerning because it may show that breast awareness campaigns are not having the intended affect.

In the 2003 survey we also found that the proportion of women who did not feel they knew much about breast cancer rose to 40 per cent in the 75+ years age group. Research may need to be carried out to investigate how to improve future breast awareness strategies for this age group.

Breast cancer is an older women's disease

A woman's risk of breast cancer increases considerably with age. Women need to be aware of this so that they are motivated to remain breast aware and to regularly attend screening as they get older.

Unfortunately, the message that age is a significant risk factor for breast cancer does not appear to be reaching older women. In our survey 72 per cent of women over 50 were unaware that breast cancer is more common in older women. This figure rises to 80 per cent in the 70+ age group and 89 per cent in the 80+ age groups. In order to provide more in-depth information about women's understanding of risk the survey also asked women to identify their current risk of breast cancer. Only six per cent of women could correctly identify their current risk. This further reinforces the fact that most women are unaware of how much breast cancer risk changes with age. Research may be needed to investigate the relevance of risk awareness to health promotion and whether a woman's understanding of risk of breast cancer may impact on her breast awareness behaviour.

Risk up to age 25	1 in 15,000
Risk up to age 30	1 in 1,900
Risk up to age 40	1 in 200
Risk up to age 50	1 in 50
Risk up to age 70	1 in 15
Risk up to age 80	1 in 11
Risk up to age 85	1 in 10
Lifetime risk (all ages)	1 in 9

Our findings are supported by previous research by Gunfeld et al (2002) which found that 30 per cent of over 70 year olds believed they were at reduced personal risk of breast cancer and 25 per cent of these women believed they were too old to develop breast cancer.

Breast screening

The survey also examined knowledge and behaviour associated with the NHS Breast Screening Programme. Only 28 per cent of women between the ages of 50-70 were aware that this is the age range during which they will be invited to attend breast screening. The survey also found that while 80 per cent of screening age participants always take up their screening invitation, 20 per cent do not. This is a significant number, in 2001-2002 just over 1.8 million women were invited for screening, and highlights that attendance could be improved. This figure is similar to the figures provided by the NHS screening programme.

Breast Cancer Care is concerned that women in the UK are not as aware as they should be about the NHS Breast Screening Programme and their access to screening opportunities. We are also worried that some women may conclude that because they are no longer routinely invited to attend breast screening after the age of 70 years they are not longer at risk of breast cancer.

Indeed, our survey found that 13 per cent of women over the age of 50 think that screening stops at 70 because they are no longer at risk after this age. In the North Region and Greater London around 20 per cent of women hold this belief. This is a significant number of women and demonstrates the need for the screening service to provide clear information to women leaving the screening programme about the fact that they are still at risk and need to remain breast aware.

Breast changes

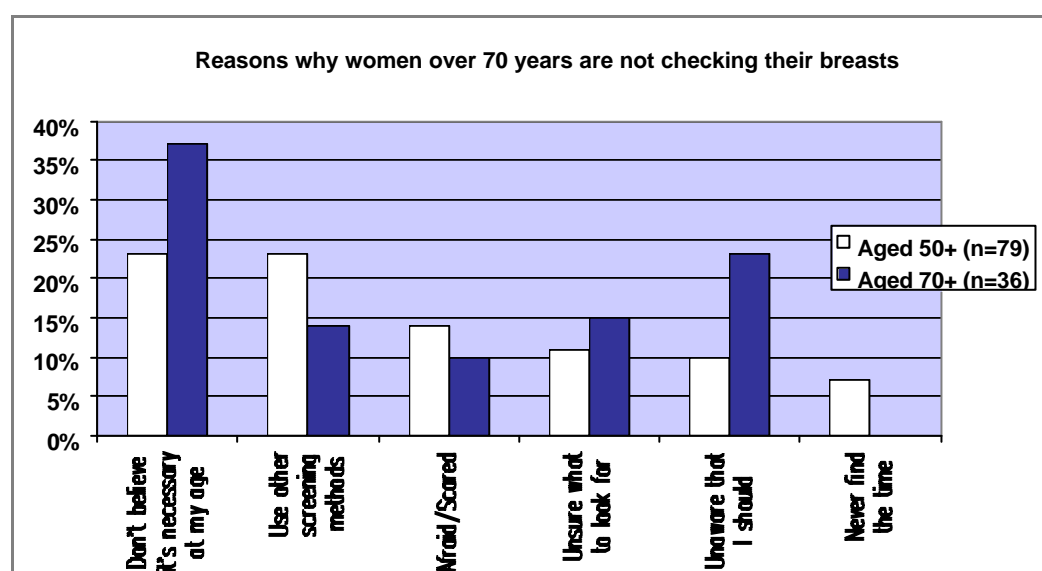
Ensuring women are knowledgeable about the signs and symptoms of breast cancer is essential for improving early detection and treatment outcomes. Significantly, our survey found that less than half of the women aged over 50 years said they were confident that they knew what breast changes should be reported to a GP or other health professional. In the 70+ age group this was even higher, with two-thirds saying they did not know what to report. It is extremely worrying that such a high proportion of older women do not know what signs and symptoms to report to their GP.

Breast awareness

Breast awareness plays an essential part in the improvement of breast cancer treatment outcomes by aiding early detection. Breast awareness is about people knowing how their breasts look and feel normally so that they notice any change that might be unusual for them. It is important for all women to be breast aware, even those in the invited screening age range of 50-70 years because many cases of breast cancer may still be detected in between screening appointments. Breast awareness is also important because only 20 per cent of patients who attend breast clinics for investigation of suspected breast cancer have been identified through the screening programme, whereas 80 per cent are referred by GPs indicating that women have noticed symptoms or signs themselves (NICE, 2002).

Breast Cancer Care is extremely concerned that the survey revealed that 1 in 5 women over the age of 50 do not look at or feel their breasts from time to time. This proportion rises to 1 in 4 in women over the age of 70 years.

In those aged over 70 years who never check their breasts, 37 per cent never look at or feel their breasts because they do not feel it is necessary at their age and 23 per cent are unaware that they should.



Age related knowledge

Throughout the survey we found the amount of knowledge women have about breast cancer declines with age. Consistently the 70+ age group knew less than the 50-70 age group and women aged over 80 years knew the least about breast cancer. This confirms the need to target older women, particularly those aged 70+ with information about breast cancer.

Regional differences

The survey also pointed to a number of significant regional differences in levels of awareness and understanding of breast cancer. However, the small numbers involved once the survey responses are analysed by regional areas mean that these figures must be viewed with caution and further research would be required to confirm these findings.

- Only 20 per cent of women over 50 in the West Midlands and 25 per cent of women over 50 in Wales are confident that they know what breast changes should be reported to their GP or other health professional.
- Eighty per cent of women over 50 in the West Midlands, Wales and Scotland do not realise that breast cancer risk increases with age.
- Almost 50 per cent of the over 50 women surveyed in the West Midlands do not know what breast awareness means.

Numbers interviewed by region:

- West midlands – 41
- Wales – 33
- Scotland – 40

Conclusion

Our survey has shown that the majority of older women are not aware that their risk of breast cancer increases with age, many are not confident that they know which changes to report to a GP or health professional and a significant number never check their breasts. It also shows that many women do not have a clear understanding of the NHS Breast Screening Programme. These findings suggest older women may be at risk of delayed detection of breast cancer because of lack of knowledge.

- Over 70 per cent of women over 50 years are unaware that breast cancer is more common in older women.
- Less than 50 per cent of women over 50 are confident that they know what breast changes should be reported to a GP or health professional.
- Twenty per cent of women over 50 never look at or feel their breasts from time to time.

Recommendations

Breast Cancer Care is launching the '80 over 50' poster campaign which aims to raise public awareness that breast cancer risk increases with age.

Breast Cancer Care also believes that there is a need for the Department of Health and the NHS Breast Screening Programme to review their breast cancer education strategy and information in order to ensure they are getting the right messages to the right women at the right time. In particular they should consider the information they provide for older women about risk increasing with age, signs and symptoms of breast cancer and breast awareness.

We also believe information produced by the Department of Health should stress that women over 70 need to remain breast aware once they leave the screening programme and that they can still request to be screened after this age.

References

Gunfeld, E.A., Ramirez, A.J., Hunter, M.S. & Richards, M.A. (2002) Women's knowledge and beliefs regarding breast cancer. *British Journal of Cancer*, 86, 1373-1378.

Surveys conducted by Ipsos-UK in home face-to-face CAPI omnibus (CAPIBUS) (2002 & 2003).