

Poll finds women can do more to prevent cancer... but aren't

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When it comes to preventing cancer, women believe they're doing more than they actually are. Perhaps most surprising, women are more afraid of getting Alzheimer's disease than cancer, even though cancer causes nearly ten times more deaths per year.

These are among the new findings of a national opinion poll by The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center and Prevention of 800 women between the ages of 18 and 93. The survey, part of a November issue special feature, "Winning the War on Cancer," hits newsstands this week.

Less than one third of respondents said they are putting wholly into practice what science has shown effective toward preventing cancer, including following daily recommended guidelines for healthy eating and exercise. More alarming, about 42 percent of women who responded said they felt little or no sense of control over cancer and many aren't doing much to thwart the disease, when in fact, 63 percent of cancers are caused by changeable behaviors: smoking, poor diet, physical inactivity and obesity.

Cancer will prove fatal for an estimated 270,000 women in 2007, with the greatest number of cancer deaths attributed to lung cancer. Approximately 678,000 new cases of cancer in women will be diagnosed in the United States this year, including over 178,000 new cases of breast cancer¹. Looking at these statistics, the M. D. Anderson-Prevention poll sought to gauge women's knowledge, fears and sense of control over

cancer; what, if anything, they are doing to avoid the disease and how these efforts measure up to recommended guidelines.

According to the poll, women who rated themselves as higher on the social status ladder - regardless of wealth - and who reported a stronger support network, were more likely to take an activist approach to personal health and feel empowered in their ability to lower their cancer risk. In contrast, women who viewed themselves as being of lower social status in their communities were less likely to engage in behaviors that are known to decrease cancer risk. In fact, they were more likely to be smokers and less likely to have ever had a mammogram.

The poll found that women who smoke - a behavior that is extremely harmful in its own right - are also more likely to engage in a constellation of other unhealthy behaviors. Women smokers rated their health as significantly poorer than non-smoking respondents. Although they admitted they know their cancer risk is "moderate to very high," they are still less likely to eat right, exercise or to have had a mammogram.

"Our findings begin to break down complex psychological, social and behavioral components behind health decisions women make to avoid cancer. Interestingly, we see that women who feel like they have more control over cancer are more apt to engage in healthy behaviors, and as a result, do have more control. For women, one might say cancer prevention is a state of mind," according to the survey's lead author, Jennifer Irvin Vidrine, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Health Disparities Research at M. D. Anderson, and an expert on cancer health disparities.

A gap between knowing and doing in terms of recommended guidelines

The majority of women say they eat a healthy diet (81 percent) and exercise regularly (73 percent), but:

- only 31 percent consume the recommended daily fruit servings (2/day)
- as few as 12 percent report getting enough vegetables (3/day)
- only 32 percent actually get 150 minutes of exercise per week, the minimum recommended for cancer prevention

When it comes to cancer screenings, there's room to improve:

- 67 percent of respondents age 40 and older have had a mammogram within the past 12 months
- 77 percent have had a Pap test within the past three years
- but only 57 percent of respondents age 50 and older have been screened for colon cancer (colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy)
- of smokers, 65 percent had ever had a mammogram; and 23 percent have had a sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy

On the new HPV vaccine - which protects against cervical cancer - for girls and women ages 9 to 26:

- 67 percent of respondents had heard about it
- 78 percent of those who had heard of it thought that girls in the age group should receive it, and
- 70 percent of women with daughters under the age of 26 (one third of respondents) who had heard of the vaccine wanted their daughter to get it

Prevention editor-in-chief Liz Vaccariello says, "We know that all

cancers caused by cigarettes can be prevented and that a host of others - caused by obesity, inactivity, nutrition, infectious agents and the sun's rays - can be avoided or successfully treated when detected early. The poll begins to tap into discrepancies between what people think they are doing to protect their health and what they are actually doing, and areas where overall knowledge could be improved."

Dr. Irvin Vidrine says the findings underscore how difficult it is to change personal behaviors, particularly for women whose family and career responsibilities may leave little time to tend to personal health matters. "Our findings should serve as a wake-up call to women. As the divide between knowing and doing becomes clear, women can be more vigilant in taking their cancer prevention behaviors to a higher level of compliance."

Source: University of Texas

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