

Study finds media coverage of breast cancer focuses too little on prevention

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News coverage of breast cancer focuses too much on treatments and not enough on prevention, a trend that could prove risky in the long run for many women, say researchers at Michigan State University.

An MSU analysis of national media's coverage of the disease found that over a two-year period, 31 percent of the 231 stories that appeared in some of the country's top newspapers, magazines and television networks focused on treatment, while only 18 percent looked at prevention.

The research paper, titled "A Comprehensive Analysis of Breast Cancer News Coverage in Leading Media Outlets Focusing on Environmental Risks and Prevention," is published in the latest edition of the Journal of Health Communication.

"What we're concerned about is people will think, 'well, the scientists are going to come up with a cure, so we don't need to worry about prevention,'" said Charles Atkin, one of the authors of the study and a University Distinguished Professor of communication at MSU. "I think this emphasis on treatment, especially so-called breakthroughs, may lead to complacency."

In 2003 and 2004, Atkin and colleagues analyzed breast-cancer coverage in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, NBC Nightly News, ABC World News Tonight and the CBS Evening News.

The researchers found that by a two-to-one margin, the news stories focused more on narratives – personal stories of cancer patients – rather than on data and statistics. And, said Atkin, while this can provide more compelling stories for readers and viewers, it doesn't do much to help further the cause of cancer prevention.

“The biggest single type of story was about breast cancer treatment, and narratives lend themselves much better to that kind of story,” he said. “Stories about prevention, about people exercising and eating right, just don't make great copy.”

While many of the factors that can lead to breast cancer are beyond one's control – such as family history and age – there are many steps people can take to reduce their risk of breast, or any other type of cancer, including diet, exercise and avoidance of certain substances in the environment that are known to contribute to breast cancer.

Environmental risks are broadly defined as contaminants in the air, ground or items we come in contact with; pharmaceuticals; and lifestyle practices.

The research also found that of the stories that focused on environmental risk factors for breast cancer, about 12 percent discussed the use of hormone replacement therapy. Recent research finds there may be a link between HRT and breast cancer.

Other risk factors covered in these stories included the use of certain pharmaceuticals, obesity, exposure to chemical contaminants and pesticides, diet, tobacco use and exposure to second-hand smoke.

“The media,” Atkin said, “really underrepresent the risks involving lifestyle and the prevention activities people can make.”

Also lacking were stories about the role parents can play in helping their children prevent breast cancer.

“Advice to parents on how they should be raising their daughters in terms of diet and exercise was completely ignored,” said Sandi Smith, study co-author who is with MSU’s Health and Risk Communication Center. “There were no stories at all.”

Atkin said media awareness of promoting cancer-prevention techniques is crucial.

“The media in general have a large influence on what women believe is risky and what they learn about how to prevent breast cancer,” he said. “Some ongoing studies are finding that the media, along with friends and family members, are more influential than even physicians.”

Source: Michigan State University

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