

Stress wrongly blamed for breast cancer

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Australian breast cancer survivors mistakenly see stress as the cause of their cancer while vastly underestimating the possibility that an unhealthy lifestyle may have been a contributing factor.

The Bupa Health Foundation and Well-being After [Breast Cancer](#) Study conducted by researchers at Monash University and published in this month's *Psycho-Oncology* journal found that of women who felt there was a direct cause of their cancer more than half – 58.1 per cent – believed it was due to stress.

The research showed only two per cent of respondents attributed their breast cancer to lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise and alcohol consumption, despite scientific evidence that being overweight and excessive alcohol consumption are risk factors.

“While the exact causes of breast cancer are unknown, there is no scientific evidence that points to stress as a cause of breast cancer,” said Dr Christine Bennett, Chair of the Bupa Health Foundation said.

“Reducing stress may be good for general health, but it’s not a way of reducing the risk of breast cancer. By maintaining a healthy weight, maintaining a good diet and taking regular exercise we can all reduce the risk of breast cancer and other types of cancers as well.”

The study asked 1,496 [breast cancer survivors](#) if they believed there was anything that caused them to develop breast cancer. Stress was by far the most common response, way above hormone therapy (13.8 per cent) or family history (10.2 per cent) in those women who believed there was a factor that caused their cancer.

Associate Professor Robin Bell, co-author of the study and Deputy Director of the Women’s Health Program at Monash University’s Alfred Hospital, said despite women being poorly informed about the causes of their cancer it is important that healthcare providers are aware of these beliefs in order to understand the lifestyle changes made by breast cancer survivors.

“Making lifestyle changes, like starting an exercise program, may have positive benefits,” Associate Professor Bell said.

“But healthcare professionals also need to be wary of patients taking misguided steps in trying to ‘improve’ their health.

“For example, cutting out dairy products may remove some fat from the diet but it could have a negative effect on the bone health of women who, due to some cancer treatments, are already at risk of osteoporosis.”

Associate Professor Bell also pointed out that some women who believe

their cancer was stress induced may feel guilty because they may feel they could have avoided breast cancer if they had acted to reduce the amount of [stress](#) in their lives.

“If doctors are aware of this guilt they will be in a better position to help women address their feelings and overcome their distress.”

Provided by Monash University

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