

# Women unsure of breast cancer causes

September 22 2015, by Rob Payne, Sciencenetwork Wa

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Women appear uncertain about risk factors for breast cancer, despite the disease being the most common cancer for women in Australia, and their second most common cancer cause of death.

A University of Western Australia-led study involved 2,742 women, with researchers drawing on [breast cancer survivors](#) from the WA Cancer Registry and women without breast cancer from the WA

electoral roll.

Women were matched in five-year groups ranging from 18 to 80 years of age and asked to rate 37 items according to whether they increased, decreased or had no effect on the chances of getting breast cancer.

"Women's perceptions about the risk factors for breast cancer differ from scientific evidence," UWA researcher Dr Natalia Lizama says.

"Women believed that factors such as stress and food additives increased [breast cancer risk](#), even though there is limited evidence of an association."

The results were also inconsistent about drinking alcohol.

Although 70 per cent of participants correctly identified alcohol as a risk factor for breast cancer, only 54.5 per cent identified beer and 39.4 per cent pointed the finger at [red wine](#) as a risk factor.

"The inconsistencies about the effect of red wine and alcohol on breast cancer risk may reflect media reports about the alleged health benefits of red wine for both cancer and cardiovascular disease," Dr Lizama says.

"Younger women were much more likely to identify alcohol, red wine, beer and hormone replacement therapy as increasing risk and [physical activity](#) as decreasing risk.

"University-educated women were generally more aware of risk factors, and were significantly more likely than others to correctly identify being overweight or obese as a danger."

**Health campaigns need to be targeted to different**

## groups

The researchers say these demographic differences suggest public health initiatives and health promotion programs need to be tailored for different groups.

Overall, participants most commonly pointed to smoking as a risk factor in breast cancer, at 87.3 per cent, with passive smoking close behind at 82.8 per cent.

These were followed by pesticides, stress, food additives, chemical fumes and high-fat foods, which roughly three-quarters of [women](#) incorrectly identified as being [risk factors](#).

The research found 37.9 per cent of respondents believed salt had a connection to [breast cancer](#), while 11.7 per cent believed lipstick and eight per cent thought loud music increased their risk.

Seventy per cent of respondents correctly identified physical activity as decreasing risk, while the 22.4 per cent suggested—incorrectly—that consuming tomato-based sauces could help.

**More information:** "Women's beliefs about breast cancer causation in a breast cancer case-control study." *Psychooncology*. 2015 Jun 18. [DOI: 10.1002/pon.3869](https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.3869)

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