

Schools should provide girls with breast cancer education

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More than 70 per cent of school girls want to know more about breast cancer, according to new research released today.

Almost half of schoolgirls aged 11 to 18 (44 per cent) have concerns about how to check themselves for signs of the disease and more than three quarters (77 per cent) rate the topic of breast cancer education as 'extremely important'.

The findings are the result of joint research into breast cancer education by academics from the University of Portsmouth, St Mary's University, Twickenham, and the University of Chichester, in which more than 2,000 schoolgirls aged 11-18 were surveyed for their views and demographic information including age, ethnicity, [school](#) type and breast size.

The findings demonstrate that 72 per cent of schoolgirls want to know more about breast cancer, and even among those who do not, 40 per cent still rate the topic as 'extremely important'.

Girls who wanted to know more about breast cancer were represented in every school type (single sex schools, single sex schools with boys in sixth form and mixed schools) and older schoolgirls were significantly more likely to want to know more about breast cancer than their younger counterparts. No connection was found between the desire for increased knowledge of the subject and breast size.

The results also uncovered that ethnicity is associated with the importance schoolgirls attribute to the topic. Girls from black and ethnic minority backgrounds were three times more likely to rate the topic as 'not important' (range 8 to 11 per cent) compared to white school girls (3 per cent), while significantly more white schoolgirls wanted to know more about breast cancer (76 per cent).

The report highlights existing research in adults which suggests that cultural and religious beliefs, embarrassment and seeing cancer as a taboo subject are all recognised barriers to learning about cancer and participating in health promotion activities.

Links with physical activity were also illustrated by the research with girls who were more physically active reporting that they wanted to know more about breast cancer. Although even among girls who were less active the majority (61 per cent) of inactive girls still wanted to know more.

Commenting on the findings, Professor in Biomechanics at the University of Portsmouth, Joanna Wakefield-Scurr, said:

"Adolescence is recognised as a critical time for establishing lifelong behaviours. By engaging school girls from all ethnic groups from a young age, breast education in schools could provide the opportunity to increase the likelihood of girls practicing positive breast health behaviours in adulthood in a sustainable and cost-effective way."

Dr Nicola Brown of the School of Sport, Health and Applied Science at St Mary's University, Twickenham, added:

"Our research provides evidence of the need for effective and inclusive breast cancer education for schoolgirls across all schools.

"Breast cancer is one of the leading causes of cancer-related mortality and it is well-established that early detection improves outcomes.

"Educating girls on the signs and symptoms of breast [cancer](#) and how to be breast aware, will help [girls](#) to recognise what is normal for them and when to seek help.

"We are currently piloting a breast education initiative with schoolgirls that covers a range of breast health issues including [breast development](#), [breast](#) support and bra fit, and [breast cancer](#). Our preliminary findings have been really encouraging, with positive feedback received from both teachers and students."

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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