

The Angelina Jolie Effect on breast cancer screening

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Angelina Jolie received widespread media attention in 2013 when she told the public that she'd tested positive for BRCA1, a gene associated with an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancers, and subsequently had a double mastectomy. Now research shows that this publicity did influence some women's intentions to seek out similar genetic testing.

"We put a questionnaire online within three days of Jolie's announcement, to see if the announcement influenced anyone's intention to get genetic testing," says Kami Kosenko, an associate professor of communication at North Carolina State University and lead author of a paper on the work. "We also wanted to see if there were any variables, such as whether people felt they identified with Jolie, that were associated with people who were influenced by Jolie's announcement."

Three hundred and fifty-six people from across the United States completed the questionnaire, of which 295 were aware of Jolie's announcement.

Of the 229 female study participants, researchers

found that 30 percent intended to get tested to see if they carried the BRCA1 gene, with 23 percent saying they would probably get tested and 7 percent saying they would definitely get tested.

"Women who identified more strongly with Jolie were more likely to intend to get the [genetic testing](#) regardless of whether they had a family history of cancer than women who did have a family history of cancer but did not identify with Jolie," Kosenko says. "The same was true of women who felt they had some sort of parasocial relationship with Jolie, meaning they viewed her as a friend. This means that Jolie's speaking out definitely had an impact."

The findings suggest that when it comes to a [celebrity's](#) impact on the public, that impact depends in part on the extent to which the public identifies with the celebrity. In other words, there appears to be something about particular celebrities that engenders more public interest and concern.

"This indicates that health practitioners and advocates may want to consider how relatable a celebrity is with the target audience when searching for a celebrity spokesperson," Kosenko says.

"However, more work needs to be done to help us understand what makes a celebrity relatable. For example, in our survey, non-white women were more likely to identify with Jolie than white women were. Why is that? We don't know."

Provided by North Carolina State University

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