

BREAST CANCER POLL OF BC WOMEN

Misconceptions Impact Detection and Prevention



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Vancouver, BC (March 6, 2002): New Ipsos-Reid public opinion research conducted for the BC/Yukon Chapter of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation (CBCF) and the Canadian Cancer Society (CCS) indicates that there are several important misconceptions about breast cancer that impact attitudes and early detection, plus prevention of the disease. Among the key findings of the poll of 750 British Columbia women, two-thirds (65%) believe that breast cancer is the number one health issue for women, while only 31% are concerned about developing breast cancer. In addition, while most British Columbia women (59%) believe breast cancer is genetically inherited, only 5-10% of cases are known to be genetic in origin. At the same time, a plurality (43%) believe that the risk of breast cancer is greatest for women in their 40's, despite the fact that 46% of cases occur in women aged 50 – 69 and 32% in women over 70 years of age.

“Clearly, while there’s plenty of awareness of breast cancer, there’s still a great deal that needs to be done to get the facts out so that women are even better informed,” said Virginia Greene, Chair of the BC/Yukon Chapter of the CBCF. “For instance, some of these misconceptions get in the way of early detection, particularly if women in their 60’s believe they’re free and clear because they didn’t get breast cancer in their 40’s.”

Greene said the study provides the CBCF, and partner organizations such as the Canadian Cancer Society, with practical insight when they look at creating and promoting information programs that will make a difference in the lives of British Columbia women.

“One of the most interesting findings is just how many women believe that ‘it won’t happen to me’ because of their age, or the fact that their mother never had breast cancer,” explained Barbara Kaminsky, CEO of the Canadian Cancer Society’s BC & Yukon Division. “When women believe they are in the clear, there is less emphasis on the importance of mammograms, physical examination by a trained health professional, and breast-self-examination. The survey also indicates that the fear of breast cancer far outweighs the reality of the statistics. About one in nine women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, however one in 26 women will die of this disease.”



“Early detection is key to surviving this disease, so we’re dealing with important perceptions about health and prevention,” added Greene. “Also, the poll made it clear just how important the internet has become as a source of information. In fact, a third of women would go to the internet first if they wanted information about breast cancer.”

These are the findings of an Ipsos-Reid poll conducted on behalf of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation, BC/Yukon Chapter and the Canadian Cancer Society, British Columbia and Yukon Division between November 22 and December 2, 2001. The poll is based on a randomly selected sample of 750 adult women over the age of 16 in British Columbia. With a sample of this size, the results are considered accurate to within ± 3.6 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire population of adult women in BC been polled. The margin of error will be larger within regions and for other sub-groupings of the survey population. These data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional and age composition reflects that of the actual population of adult women in BC according to the 1996 Census data.

The Ipsos-Reid poll follows a larger two-part qualitative study conducted by the CBCF of BC women who have had breast cancer and their caregivers. The final report from the study details a variety of gaps in breast cancer information and care, as well as the confusion and frustration women feel as they make their way through the maze of support services that are often disconnected from each other. The final report from the qualitative study will be ready for release in the next few weeks.

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Ipsos-Reid Survey Highlights

In late 2001, the CBCF's BC/Yukon Chapter with support from the Canadian Cancer Society's BC & Yukon Division, commissioned Ipsos-Reid to undertake a quantitative analysis of 750 randomly selected women in BC. These women were surveyed via telephone to find out:

- what they believe causes breast cancer,
- what they actually do to protect themselves,
- who they think is at risk,
- what precautions they think are important,
- who they go to for information, and
- how much progress they feel is being made in the fight against the disease.

The highlights of the results are as follows:

- The plurality (43%) of BC women believe that women in their forties are at greatest risk for breast cancer, while in fact women in their sixties are most at risk..
- The majority (59%) of BC women believe breast cancer is genetically inherited, in fact, only 5-10 per cent of cases are known to be genetic in origin.
- Few women (31%) are concerned about developing breast cancer themselves. Yet the majority (65%) identify breast cancer as the number one health issue for women in BC. Indeed, more than twice as many women mention breast cancer as the greatest risk to women in BC than any other health issue.
- 68% of women over 40 say they have had a mammogram in the last one to two years, yet statistics indicate that only 37.6% of BC women in this age group have indeed had mammograms over the past one to two years. This apparent contradiction may suggest that women know about the importance of mammograms, but are still not getting tested in sufficient numbers.

- 32% of BC women believe a great deal of progress is being made when it comes to beating breast cancer and 59% are neutral on the subject. In fact, the death rate from breast cancer has decreased over the past 20 years. For example, in the 1970's the five year survival rate was 74% and in the 1990's it increased to 85%. Mortality rates from breast cancer have declined steadily since 1990 and are at their lowest rates since 1950.

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