Belief in numbers: When and why women disbelieve tailored breast cancer risk statistics

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PRESS RELEASE

1 in 5 women don’t believe their breast cancer risk

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Despite taking a tailored risk assessment tool that factors in family history and personal habits, nearly 20 percent of women did not believe their breast cancer risk, according to a new study from the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center. Most of the women who didn’t believe their risk numbers said they did not feel it took into account their family history of cancer or their personal health habits. The tool did ask relevant questions about the individual’s family and personal history. “If people don’t believe their risk numbers, it does not allow them to make informed medical decisions,” says senior study author Angela Fagerlin, Ph.D., associate professor of internal medicine at the University of Michigan Medical School and a research scientist at the VA Ann Arbor Center for Clinical Management Research.

“Women who believe their risk is not high might skip chemoprevention strategies that could significantly reduce their risk. And women who think their risk should be higher could potentially undergo treatments that might not be medically appropriate, which can have long-term ramifications,” she adds.

The findings, published in Patient Education and Counseling, are part of a larger study looking at how to improve patients’ understanding of risk information.

The most common reason women said they disagreed with their risk was that their family history made them either more or less likely to develop breast cancer. Others felt a lack of family history meant their cancer risk should be very low.

One-third of women cited a gut instinct that their risk numbers just seemed too high or too low.

“We’ve put so much fear in people about breast cancer so they feel at high risk,” says lead study author Laura D. Scherer, Ph.D. “We found that many women assumed certain factors should impact their risk, but those are factors that don’t put a woman at increased risk.

“We have a trend toward personalized medicine and individualized medicine, but if people don’t believe their personalized risk numbers, they’re not going to get the best medical care for them,” says Scherer, who is now at the University of Missouri. She completed the research while at the University of Michigan.

The full press release can be found here: http://www.uofmhealth.org/news/archive/201308/1-5-women-don%E2%80%99t-believe-their-breast-cancer-risk

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