



Television news exposure is related to fear of breast cancer

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 6 December 2008

Keywords:

Breast cancer
Fear
Television
News

ABSTRACT

Objective. This study assessed the relationship between exposure to breast cancer content in television news programs and fear of breast cancer.

Methods. A quantitative standardized Health and Media Interview Survey was administered to a random sample of 500 Flemish women aged 18–85 years in 2007. The survey contained closed measures on demographics, breast cancer fear, television exposure and potential confounding variables such as trait anxiety, perceived risk and experience with breast cancer.

Results. 80.6% of the women were moderately to very afraid of being diagnosed with breast cancer. Multinomial logistic regression results showed that women who had occasionally been exposed to breast cancer content in television news were 1.9 times more likely to be very afraid of breast cancer (95% CI 1.1–3.4). Women who had frequently been exposed were 3.3 times more likely to be moderately afraid (95% CI 1.1–10), and 7.5 times more likely to be very afraid of breast cancer (95% CI 2.4–23.8).

Conclusions. These results suggest a relationship between exposure to breast cancer coverage in television news programs and fear of breast cancer.

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Introduction

Breast cancer fear or anxiety is an important predictor of women's preventive health behaviors (Hay et al., 2006). Several studies have investigated the factors related to anxiety or worry about a cancer threat, such as family history (Henderson et al., 2008) and vulnerability perceptions (Zajac et al., 2006). A growing body of research is recognizing the important role of mass-media exposure in influencing a variety of health beliefs and attitudes. For example, studies found that regular exposure to health topics on television led to heightened personal and general vulnerability perceptions (e.g., Snyder and Rouse, 1995) and to increased knowledge of those health topics (Brodie et al., 2001). To date, however, little or no attention appears to have been paid to the potential influence of television viewing on fear of breast cancer.

Breast cancer has been found to be one of the most commonly covered health problems in television (TV) news (Pribble et al., 2006). It is generally portrayed as a dreaded and excruciating disease that is associated with hopelessness and death (Clarke, 1992). News media coverage of breast cancer frequently features personal stories of patients (Atkin et al., 2008), which may be vivid, touching and memorable.

The current study, therefore, aims to examine the relationship between exposure to TV news programs and fear of getting diagnosed with breast cancer.

Methods

Procedure

This study uses a sample of 500 women from the Health and Media Interview Survey (HMIS). First year undergraduate students of a social sciences program received course credit for conducting three face-to-face interviews. Students who agreed to take part received randomly selected interview addresses. At these addresses, the person of the household with the most recent birthday was selected as respondent. Of the 916 respondents, there were 500 female participants. This study received IRB approval at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

Measures

Demographics

Age and level of education. Age was recoded into a 3-category variable, taking into account the actual risk of getting breast cancer: low risk group (ages 18–40), high risk group (ages 41–60) and medium risk group (ages 60+).

Breast cancer fear

Participants answered the question *How afraid are you of being diagnosed with breast cancer?* on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) not afraid at all to (7) very much afraid. Previous research has found similar one-item measures of health perceptions to be reliable and valid (Diefenbach et al., 1993). The breast cancer fear variable was recoded to a 3-point scale such that 1 = not afraid, 2 = moderately afraid and 3 = very afraid.

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Personal risk perception

To assess perceived vulnerability of developing breast cancer, respondents were asked *How likely do you think you are to get breast cancer in your lifetime?* Answers were coded on a 7-point scale from (1) certain not to happen to (7) certain to happen. The measure was recoded into a 3-point scale with 1=no chance or a slight chance that it will happen, 2=moderate chance that it will happen, and 3=large chance that it will happen.

Trait fear

We also measured trait fear, because a stable tendency to be anxious may be related to cancer-specific fear. Participants reported to which extent they generally experienced feelings of fear, nervousness, anxiousness and worry on a scale from (1) very little to (7) very much (Cronbach's $\alpha=.78$). Responses on the items were summed to create a composite variable of trait fear. A median split was conducted to create a dichotomous variable (1=low trait anxiety, 2=high trait anxiety).

Personal breast cancer experience

Participants reported whether they had been diagnosed with breast cancer (no=0, yes=1).

Family history and experience through others

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they knew a family member or friend that had been diagnosed with breast cancer (no=0, yes=1).

Exposure to breast cancer content in television news programs

Respondents were asked *How often have you encountered breast cancer messages in television news programs (such as daily newscasts and news magazines) during the previous month?* Response options ranged from (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) occasionally, (4) frequently to (5) very frequently. This measure has previously been used in studies on television exposure and health risk perceptions (Coleman, 1993; Snyder and Rouse, 1995). Responses were recoded to a 3-point scale such that 1=never, 2=occasionally and 3=frequently.

Statistical analysis

Multinomial logistic regression analyses were conducted using SPSS (version 14, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Odds ratio's (OR) with

95% confidence intervals (CI) were used. All results reported were two-sided and differences at p -values of ≤ 0.05 were accepted as significant.

Results

Sample characteristics

The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 85 (mean age=43.8). Of the women in our sample, 43.8% were between 18 and 40 years old, 36.1% were 41 to 60 years old and 20.1% were 60 years old or older. Of the respondents, 10.8% never finished twelfth grade, 35.2% had some high school education degree and 54% had some college education degree or higher degree.

Incidence of breast cancer anxiety and perceived vulnerability

Only 19.4% of the women in our sample reported not being afraid of breast cancer. About half of the women (49.9%) said to be moderately afraid, and 30.7% indicated to be very anxious of getting breast cancer. The majority of women in our sample believed that there was a moderate chance that they would develop breast cancer (79.6%). Of the respondents, 3.6% perceived their chances of getting breast cancer to be high. 16.8% believed there was no or only a slight chance of developing breast cancer in their lifetime.

Incidence of breast cancer experience

Most of the women in our sample had not been diagnosed with cancer: only 11 women (2.2%) said that they were (or had been) a breast cancer patient. More than half of the participants (54.9%) did, however, know a friend or family member that had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Exposure to television news content about breast cancer

Seven out of ten women (70.6%) reported that they had seen something about breast cancer in TV news in the month preceding the survey. Of those women, 48% indicated that they had been exposed to messages about breast cancer occasionally and 16% of them reported that they had encountered breast cancer issues in TV news frequently.

Table 1
Levels of breast cancer anxiety: row percentages and odds ratios of the multinomial logistic regression analysis for frequency of exposure to breast cancer messages in television news programs

Exposure to breast cancer messages in TV news ^a	N	Overall level of fear (row %)			Multinomial logistic regression			
		Not afraid	Moderately afraid	Very afraid	Unadjusted model			
					Moderately afraid		Very afraid	
					Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI
Never	145	26.2	50.3	23.4	1.0	–	1.0	–
Occasionally	293	18.1	50.4	31.4	1.5	.88–2.4	1.9*	1.1–3.4
Frequently	56	7.1	44.6	48.2	3.3*	1.1–10	7.5**	2.4–23.8
Exposure to breast cancer messages in TV news ^b					Adjusted model ^c			
					Moderately afraid		Very afraid	
					Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI
Never					1.0	–	1.0	–
Occasionally					1.6	.9–2.7	1.9*	1.1–3.7
Frequently					3.3*	1–10.7	7.0*	2.1–23.7

This study was conducted with a sample of Flemish women (N=500) from the HMIS, October–November 2007.

^a Model chi-square 86.2, $p<.0001$ (df 16).

^b Model chi-square 16.9, $p<.0001$ (df 4).

^c Odds ratio's were adjusted for age, level of education, perceived risk, trait anxiety and experience with breast cancer.

* $p<.05$.

** $p<.001$.

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