



Original article

Assessing the level of breast cancer awareness among recently diagnosed patients in Ain Shams University Hospital



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ABSTRACT

Breast cancer is the leading female malignancy among Egyptian women. The majority of Egyptian breast cancer patients present at late stages of the disease with a large tumor size compared to Western countries. Low breast cancer awareness, social and cultural factors were suggested to play crucial role in late presentation of breast cancer among Egyptians. The aim of our present study is to establish a questionnaire-based survey that can assess levels of breast cancer awareness among Egyptians. Patients enrolled were interviewed and answered 60 questions related to knowledge, symptoms, risk factors, prevention and management options of breast cancer. We evaluated our interactions with breast cancer patients and defined the level of awareness gained from education and culture of Egyptian women. Our results described that Egyptian breast cancer patients lack knowledge about their illness and condition. The lowest levels of awareness were related to age, education and culture. We concluded that breast cancer public awareness and women education programs covering factors identified in our study is warranted among Egyptian population.

Overview

Objective: To assess breast cancer awareness among recently diagnosed breast cancer Egyptian patients.
Subjects and methods: Among 289 interviewed breast cancer patients we enrolled 45 patients who fulfilled the study inclusion criteria. Participants were asked to answer a validated 60-item questionnaire that inquires about socio-demographic characteristics, knowledge of breast cancer symptoms, risk factors, symptoms, prevention, general management and willingness to participate in awareness campaigns. The average of interview time was about 45 min, depending on patient's age and education level.
Results: The mean age of included patients was 48.2 ± 10.19 years. Geographical distribution revealed that 66.7% patients were from Cairo and the rest were from other governorates, including Aswan, Sharqia, Mansora, Qena, Kalyobia, Elminya and Sohag. Among interviewed patients 85% were non-working housewives, 42.2% of them were illiterate. Questions about knowledge of breast cancer revealed that 53.33% of patients knew an acquaintance with breast cancer; however, they spent a median time of 3 months to seek medical advice after recognizing the first symptom with a delay range between a month and 72 months. We found that 73% of the participants presented to a physician with the same first recognized symptom and 75.6% didn't think of cancer then as a possible diagnosis. Total breast cancer knowledge scores had an average of 13.3 (out of 35 knowledge points), with 93% of the patients recognizing "painless breast mass" as a breast cancer symptom and 44% only recognized the concept of breast self examination. Interestingly, 61.4% identified breastfeeding as a risk factor for breast cancer, 60% did not recognize mammography as an early detection method, and 57.7% agreed that clinical breast examination (CBE) is important for early detection. Regarding management, 75% said breast cancer was potentially curable and 60% said medical care could be helpful regardless the age of presentation.

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Conclusion: Egyptian breast cancer patients knew little about their condition. Less awareness was related to age and education level. Low knowledge of risk factors, early detection and management of breast cancer should be addressed by designing patient education programs, where less educated patients are supported by health care professionals to participate in the management of breast cancer. Moreover, we found that 67% and 97% of enrolled breast cancer patients were willing as well to participate in spreading awareness among their community and among their own families, respectively.

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Introduction

Breast cancer is the most frequently diagnosed cancer in women worldwide, with about 1.4 million new cases in 2008 [1]. Statistically, breast cancer is the most common female malignancy among Egyptian women as recorded by National Cancer Institute (NCI), Egypt. Breast cancer represents about 38% of all reported cancer cases in Egyptian females, with an average age of 49.6 per 100,000 populations, with higher incidence in urban areas compared to rural areas [2,3]. Egyptian breast cancer patients presented at a late stage, with the mean tumor size of 4.5 cm [4]. In addition, most cases possess positive axillary lymph node metastasis about 70% at the time of diagnosis, while only 29.4% are free of metastasis [5]. Moreover, Egyptian breast cancer patients are characterized by high mortality rate (20.1 per 100,000) compared to USA (14.7 per 100,000) [6]. It should be noted that breast cancer in the Arab region has shown to present a decade earlier than western countries [7].

Indeed, breast cancer awareness is achieved by health education about breast cancer risk factors and early symptoms, in addition to the use of breast self-examination (BSE), targeted clinical breast examination (CBE) for at risk groups with mammography as early detection methods in limited resource settings. Moreover, it is important to spread the knowledge that breast cancer is not rapidly fatal if diagnosed early and in many cases potentially curable [8].

Awareness studies revealed that patients in communities with high level of breast cancer awareness present with less advanced stages of breast cancer disease as a result of adoption of screening methods [9]. On the contrary, patients in communities with low level of awareness often present with late stages of breast cancer disease [10].

Breast cancer knowledge among women was satisfactory in some places, mainly in Western countries [11], other reports, especially from developing countries like Iran, Nigeria and South Africa, revealed inadequate knowledge and awareness about the disease [12–14].

Studies among Egyptian patients show unsatisfactory levels of knowledge about breast cancer disease and early screening methods. One study revealed that; 10.4% of recently diagnosed breast cancer patients were aware of BSE and performed it [15]. Another study showed that; only 11.5% of a randomly selected group of female health care workers were aware about breast cancer and BSE. The majority of cases (91.8%) mentioned lack of knowledge as an obstacle against performing BSE, while 50% were afraid and worried to discover breast cancer [16].

In this regard, the present study aims to assess the level of breast cancer awareness in Egyptian patients recently diagnosed with breast cancer regarding risk factors, prevention and management of breast cancer in order to design educational programs based on knowledge that is lacking in both healthy and diseased women.

Materials and methods

Patients' enrollment

This is a cross-sectional descriptive survey on recently diagnosed breast cancer patients who presented to Ain Shams University (ASU) Hospital Breast Clinic from February 2010 till December

2010. The research protocol was accepted by the Ain Shams University ethical committee.

Recently diagnosed patients with breast cancer (less than six months) were included in the study. Patients with a diagnosis that is more than 6 months long period, patients with recurrent disease, patients who were unaware of their cancer diagnosis and those who were in a bad general condition were excluded from the study. Depending on these criteria a total number of 289 breast cancer patients were recruited and only 45 patients were included according to our inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Questionnaire design

For patient enrollment, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Ain-Shams University, Cairo, Egypt. The study is questionnaire based; special care was given during the design of the protocol, and the questionnaire in particular, due to the problem of discussing subjects like the knowledge of risk factors, early symptoms and prognosis with established cancer patients. The English version of the questionnaire is included as a [Supplementary material](#). According to recent studies [17], the research interview is an acceptable medium for research on cancer patients, whereas in another study [18] 96% of the patients found the medium to be acceptable. Special care was also given to the removal of all potentially distressing questions and other items that may make the patient feel uncomfortable.

The awareness questionnaire was designed by the authors, translated into Arabic and then validated after a pilot study in February 2010. The patients were interviewed by five house officers: A. Youssef, M. Aly, M. Mostafa, M. Alsara and A. Yehia. The Arabic translation of the questionnaire was validated, and a total breast cancer knowledge score of 35 was developed. It should be noted that 35 is the number of knowledge-related questions in our questionnaire (please refer to [Supplementary material](#)) so that each question has a score of one, with one = aware and zero = non-aware. The interviewer was provided with prewritten educational information to be given to the patient after the end of the interview. Before the interview started, the patient signed an informed consent form in Arabic after reading its contents, or if the patient was illiterate, had it read aloud and explained to her by the interviewer, a nurse or a family member, then the family member would sign the consent form on her behalf.

Our questionnaire-based interview was designed to obtain relevant socio-demographic characteristics with questions about age, residence, education, marital status, and occupation [[Supplementary material](#)]. Questionnaire was developed based upon the literature available on risk factors, common symptoms and signs [1,19], common screening methods [7], and current treatment modalities of the disease [7,8]. Furthermore, we added questions assessing the willingness to participate in future awareness campaigns. The questionnaire had 60 items to be completed over 45 min, in average.

Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 16, and results were presented using absolute figures and percentages. Analysis was

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