



Health Inequalities: Breast cancer

Introduction

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer in the UK. In 2016, 45,656 cases in women were registered in England¹ and there were around 11,500 deaths from breast cancer among women in the UK². Around one in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetime².

Prevalence and risk factors

There is little data available on the frequency and characteristics of breast cancer in women with learning disabilities³. Data from other countries suggest that the incidence of breast cancer among women with learning disabilities is similar to that of the general population^{3 4 5}.

There is a study regarding breast cancer characteristics at diagnosis in women with learning disabilities which was conducted in France⁶. Women with learning disabilities presented at an earlier age, with tumours of a higher AJCC stage than controls despite no significant differences in tumour grade and histological type, which may be attributable to delayed diagnosis⁶.

Risk of breast cancer may be lower in women with Fragile X syndrome⁷ and Down syndrome⁸. Risk of breast cancer may be higher in certain genetic conditions associated with learning disabilities. For example, for women with neurofibromatosis 1 in one area of England, the standardised incidence ratio (SIR) for breast cancer at age <50 years was 4.9 (95% CI 2.4, 8.8) suggesting they should be considered for mammography from 40 years of age⁹.

A US study found that death from breast cancer was 3 times as common among people with cerebral palsy (mainly with learning disabilities) than the general population and it is suggested that diagnosis and/or treatment may be worse in this group than in the general population¹⁰. French data indicates that obesity was twice as frequent in women with learning disabilities with breast cancer compared to those without (42.9% vs. 18.7%)³. Overall, further research is required regarding breast cancer risk and risk factors for women with learning disabilities.

Impact on people with learning disabilities

Evidence from England suggests that death rates from breast cancer in women with learning disabilities do not differ from those in the general population¹¹ and is thus as significant a health issue as for other women. For women with learning disabilities, knowledge of breast cancer including associated risks, preventative factors and signs and symptoms may be extremely limited¹². Women with learning disabilities may not easily communicate their symptoms and may be at risk of delayed diagnosis³.

Risk factors for breast cancer in women in the general population include:

- alcohol intake
- smoking
- low levels of physical exercise
- overweight and obesity
- not having children
- not having breastfed²

Whilst women with learning disabilities may be less likely to drink alcohol and smoke than women in the general population, they are more likely to be overweight or obese, engage in low levels of physical activity¹³ and to have not had children.

Healthcare and treatment

There is a lack of research or practice guidelines at every stage of the breast cancer care pathway for women with learning disabilities¹⁴. The optimal care of breast cancer relies on early diagnosis⁶. Ensuring that screening is accessible to women with learning disabilities is important as they may not easily communicate their symptoms and may be at risk of delayed diagnosis³. However, women with learning disabilities are less likely to receive breast screening than other women^{15 16 17}.

For England, GPES data for 2017/2018 indicate that 52.5% of women with a recorded learning disability received breast cancer screening in the prior 5 years compared to 68.0% of other women¹⁵. Barriers to accessing breast screening included literacy problems, consent issues and physical health; practical barriers such as transport and timing of appointment; and barriers attributed to healthcare professionals, including staff attitude and lack of awareness and training¹⁸. Other reported barriers include lack of information and embarrassment¹². Information and support related to breast cancer and mammography may not meet the needs of some people with learning disabilities¹². Paid carers play a key role in terms of support, information and as a potential influence in determining participation in breast screening¹⁹.

Social determinants

Breast cancer in England is less common in females living in the most deprived areas, but breast cancer deaths in England are more common in females living in the most deprived areas². However, there is no known data specifically relating to women with learning disabilities. The quality of social care support received and access to appropriate healthcare is likely to impact on the early diagnosis of breast cancer in women with learning disabilities but there is no known research that has specifically addressed this issue.

Resources

Public Health England (2016) [Cancer screening and people with learning disabilities](#)

References

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