Depressed Women Found to Be at Greater Risk for Breast Cancer

For Immediate Release: Contact:  
September 20, 2000 410-955-6878 or paffairs@jhsph.edu

Women who have suffered from major depression may be at an increased risk for breast cancer, according to a new report by researchers at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. Depression, however, was not found to be a significant risk factor for other kinds of cancer. The study appears in the September issue of Cancer Causes and Control.

Further research on the link with depression could one day help in the prevention of breast cancer. "There isn't a long list of risk factors for breast cancer, and we've been able to add another piece to the puzzle" said William Eaton, PhD, professor, mental hygiene, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. "We think that depression is changing the way the body works and producing disease."

Researchers from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health conducted the study, which spans 13 years, in East Baltimore as part of the Epidemiologic Catchment Area (ECA) Program. They conducted standardized interviews in 1981 to determine whether the participant had ever suffered from major depression, frequent dysphoric episodes (shorter periods of feeling down), or neither of the two. The researchers followed-up on the study in 1994 to see which of the 3,109 participants developed cancer, and more importantly, what kinds of cancer they had.

They found that women with a history of depression were nearly four times more likely to develop breast cancer than those who had never been depressed. The researchers also suspect that there may be a similar link between depression and prostate cancer in depressed men, although these data were inconclusive. Both breast and prostate cancer are hormonally mediated cancers.

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“Some forms of cancer tend to grow in response to hormones like estrogen and testosterone in a way we wouldn’t expect with lung or colon cancer,” said Joseph Gallo, MD, MPH, formerly with Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and now with the University of Pennsylvania. “There’s all this talk of mental disorders and physical disorders, but it’s people who have these disturbances. The separation between the body and the mind is an artificial construct that this type of study invalidates.”

Further research is needed to explore depression and its relationship to breast and prostate cancer. “The next challenge is to discover how this link works,” said Eaton. “If we treat the depression does it lower the risk for cancer?” Eaton also said that prior research has suggested a link between depression and cancer, but few studies have been strictly prospective, like this one, where the depression is known to precede the cancer. “For example, there are a convincing number of studies that say the survival of breast cancer depends on factors like depression.”

In previous studies of the same cohort of people, this team of researchers looked at ties between depression and other physical ailments. They found that those suffering from major depression were over twice as likely to suffer from diabetes and were over four times more likely to have heart attacks. “Every human being gets sad sometimes,” said Eaton. “We need to find out at what threshold the risk for these various disease changes.”

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