

Awareness About Menopause and Cancer Screening Among Educated Women

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OBJECTIVE - To determine the level of awareness about menopause and screening for cancer among educated women. **METHODS** - Three hundred and fifty two educated working women were asked to fill a questionnaire about their knowledge and attitudes towards menopause, hormone replacement therapy and cancer. **RESULTS** - Forty percent of the women had read about menopause in the media, and 48% thought that it was a media hype. In spite of 26% of postmenopausal women being symptomatic only 2.9% were on hormone replacement therapy. Thirty percent of the respondents had backache and 20% had a positive family history of osteoporosis. Sixty percent knew that cancer was curable if detected early and 10% knew of Pap test while 5% had undergone it. While nearly 40% of the women had read of self breast examination, less than 4% practiced it and only 8% had acquired this knowledge from a doctor. **CONCLUSION** - There is near total lack of awareness about menopause and screening for cancer, even in educated women.

Key words : menopause, Pap test, mammography

Introduction

The age of forty is an important landmark in a woman's medical life. This may be the beginning of declining estrogens and its short and long term consequences, as well as the initiation of breast cancer. Menopause, osteoporosis and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) have become important health issues for women with increasing life expectancy. Incidence of breast cancer is also on the rise. But is there adequate awareness of these even among the educated working urban women of India? A survey was undertaken to answer this important health question, by determining the level of knowledge of and attitudes towards menopause and (HRT) and the level of cancer awareness among educated working women.

Material and methods

Several lectures were arranged to bring about awareness regarding menopause and cancer among educated working women. These were arranged for secondary school teachers and for employees of banks and government offices like LIC (Life Insurance Corporation), GEB (Gujarat Electricity Board), etc. The level of education of all the women was graduation and above. Before each talk, women above the age of 35 were requested to answer a questionnaire with their identity not disclosed. The questionnaire included -

1. Respondent's particulars of age, marital and menopausal status

2. Knowledge and attitude towards menopause and HRT
3. Breast and cervical cancer awareness
4. Family history of cardiovascular diseases, cancer, osteoporosis and whether PAP test, mammography, lipid profile, etc., had been conducted.

The results were analyzed.

Results

Three hundred and fifty two women answered the questionnaire. They were divided into two groups - Group A, consisting of postmenopausal women and group B of premenopausal women.

Out of the 352 responders 170 were postmenopausal and 182 premenopausal (Table 1). The duration of menopause was 1 year in 10% of the women, 1-2 years in 8.8%, 2-5 years in 44.7% and more than 5 years in 36.5%.

Table - I : Respondents' Particulars

Particulars	Group A Postmenopausal (N=170)	Group B Premenopausal (N=182)
Age \leq 45 yrs	12%	9.2%
Age > 45 yrs	88%	90.8%
Married	96%	96%
Single	4%	4%

All the women knew about menopause as cessation of menstrual cycles after approximately 40 years of age while 95% of the postmenopausal women and 60% of premenopausal women believed that they knew of the

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symptoms of menopause. About 42% of them had read about menopause in newspapers or magazines, 15% learned of it from other women and only 8% postmenopausal women had learnt of it from their doctor.

Seventy six percent of the respondents felt that menopausal complaints last for only 1-2 years and there were no long term consequences (Table II). In group A, 58% felt less like a woman after menopause and 37% did have sexual problems. Forty eight percent of the respondents felt that menopause is a new hype created by the media and 35% felt that the more you read about it the more you are likely to suffer.

Table - II: Knowledge and Attitudes about HRT

Knowledge and Attitude	Group A	Group B
Menopausal problems last only 1-2 years and there are no long term consequences	76	76
A woman feels less like a woman after menopause	58	24
Sexual problems arise after menopause	37	14
The more you read about it the more you suffer	46	24
Menopause is a new hype created by the media	40	56
HRT is given to women with menopausal problems	42	18
HRT can be taken for a long time	20	24
Weight gain is seen with HRT	94	54
Monthly bleeding occurs with HRT	94	24
HRT causes cancer	86	72
HRT is a preventive medicine for the heart and bones	02	00
Natural approaches are better than HRT	86	92
Soya supplements	13.5	04
Calcium supplements	28.3	9.9
Exercise	29.4	16.5
HRT use	2.9	00

Figures represent percentage of those who responded.

Hot flushes and psychologic disturbances were the most common symptoms while 22% of the postmenopausal women had urinary complaints, 30% had sexual

complaints and 30% had backache. Twenty-six percent of the postmenopausal women and 14% of the perimenopausal women were symptomatic. Eight percent of the respondents had a family history of cardiovascular diseases, 20% had that of osteoporosis and 6% had that of cancer.

Fifty-two percent of the postmenopausal women knew that HRT was given to women who had menopausal complaints, but 86% of them also believed that natural approaches to tackle the problem are better than taking HRT. Ninety-four percent postmenopausal women felt that HRT leads to weight gain and restarting of monthly bleeding. More than 80% of respondents opined that HRT causes cancer (Table II). Only 11% knew of the long term benefits of HRT and only 2% saw it as a preventive medicine. 13.5% of the women knew of soya supplements and 28.3% knew of calcium supplementation during menopause. Only 2.9% were on HRT but 22% were ready to take HRT if advised by the doctor.

More than 80% of the respondents knew that breast and cervical cancers are common in women (Table III). Nearly 60% of the responders were aware that cancer could be cured if detected early. However, less than 10% of the respondents had heard of Pap test and only 5% had undergone the same. Forty-three percent of the women in group A and 35% in group B knew of breast self examination, but only 6% and 1% respectively practiced the same. Only 6% of the respondents had undergone a mammography.

Table - III: Knowledge about Cancer

Cancer Awareness	Group A	Group B
Cancer is curable if detected early	68	62
Breast and cervical cancer are common in women	80	86
Pap smear is done to prevent cervical cancer	12	06
Have you undergone Pap smear?	6	4
Do you know of breast self examination?	43	35
Do you do breast self examination?	6	1
Have you got a mammography done?	10	2

Discussion

Eighty-eight percent of the postmenopausal women were above the age of 45 (Table I) and of them, 81.2% had a menopausal duration of more than two years indicating a menopausal age of around 40 years. Women who have experienced menopausal symptoms are more likely to understand and respond to a questionnaire than otherwise¹.

On enquiring about the knowledge and attitudes on menopause, 76% of the women felt that menopausal complaints were short lived and that there were no long term consequences (Table II). While 42% of the respondents had read about menopause in the media, 48% believed that menopause is a media hype. This reflects that the urban woman wants to know about her health but probably she is not getting convincing data from the media. Hence doctors may have to be more actively involved with the media to spread awareness.

Hot flushes and psychological problems were most common, followed by urinary symptoms². In a population based survey of women's experience of menopause, it was suggested that menopausal symptoms are widely experienced by women but are not widely defined as problematic¹. Twenty-six percent of Group A and 14% of Group B respondents were symptomatic. 34.8% of group A and 19.6% group B respondents had heard of HRT. But only 2.9% of group A respondents were on HRT (Table II). Kansaria et al¹ in a survey of qualified nurses found that though 1/5th of the women were symptomatic, none of them were taking HRT. Improper knowledge (as only 8% of the respondents had visited their doctor) and cancer phobia in 80% of the respondents are probably the main reasons for this.

In our study, 86% of the respondents felt that natural methods are better than taking HRT. But the study by Kansaria et al¹ has shown that women who are taking HRT are much less likely to favour natural approaches for dealing with menopause and strongly believe that women should be on HRT if they experience distressing menopausal symptoms. Advertisements of soya products are widely found in women oriented magazines, reflecting the 13.5% respondent's knowledge of soya supplements in menopause.

Riggs and Melton³ have reported the incidence of osteoporosis in Asian women as approximately 21% at age 50 years, the main cause being inadequate calcium intake. Thirty percent of the respondents suffered from backache, which is an important initial complaint of osteoporosis, (Table II) while only 25% understood the importance of calcium supplements and exercise in menopause.

Considering the high incidence of cancer cervix in our country Pap screening becomes mandatory. In the present study, in spite of all the respondents being educated and living in a city, only 10% had heard of Pap test and only 5% had undergone it. O'Malley et al⁶ explained that despite the ability of the conventional Pap smear to reduce the incidence of cervical cancer significantly, inadequate knowledge is the foremost reason why many patients do not avail themselves of currently available screening methods.

Successful treatment of breast cancer depends on early diagnosis. Breast self examination and mammography play a central part in early detection of breast cancer. Mammography can show changes in the breast up to two years earlier than when the patient or her physician can detect them. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) says that mammography can detect 85 to 90 percent of breast cancers in women over 50. Current guidelines from the American Medical Association (AMA) and the American College of Radiology (ACR) recommend that beginning at age 40, women should get annual mammograms. Though more than 40% of the respondents had heard of breast self examination, less than 4% practiced it. This reflects the lack of motivation provided by media as compared to what a consultant can do. Ninety-six percent of the respondents felt that they would be most comfortable if their breasts were examined by a woman gynecologist. Only 10% of Group A women had undergone a mammography.

This survey clearly shows that more and more women are getting some form knowledge about menopause and HRT through the media but are lacking in a complete understanding of the same. Though cervical and breast cancers are major health issues, Pap test, breast self examination and mammography screening have not been accepted adequately. Since only 8% of the women have visited their doctor it becomes increasingly important that each woman visits the gynecologist atleast on her 40th birthday!

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