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*Self-examination of breasts
as an element of breast cancer prophylaxis*

Increased mortality, morbidity and incidence of cancer, especially malignant have been observed for over 20 years. In 1987–1996 the number of deaths due to cancer has increased in males from 19.34% to 22.13% and in females from 16.68% to 18.48%. The prognosis for 2010 estimates ca 70,000 deaths in males, and ca 40,000 in females (4). In the male population the highest number of deaths of malignancies is due to lung cancer and in the female population due to breast cancer (4, 7). Breast cancer is likely to develop in any age, though it increases with age. Out of total incidence almost 30% of breast cancer occur in pre-menopausal women and 70% in post-menopausal period. To fight back the disease it is important: 1) to improve early detection – early diagnosis; 2) to increase women’s awareness of the risk factors and functioning mechanisms of the disease and self-examination techniques (4, 6).

When breast cancer is detected at stage I of clinical development it results in 80% chances of 5-year survival. The treatment is cheaper, with very good prognosis, and spares the breast. In Poland only 20% female population consult the doctor (3, 6). It is believed that increased death rate due to malignant cancer is caused by: 1) increased size of the population in Poland, 2) changed age structure of the general population – “aging of the society”, 3) increased concentration of carcinogenic factors in the environment and behaviors promoting the progress of cancer, 4) better chances to detect cancer early.

Malignancies are second to circulatory diseases major cause of death in Poland (5). One of the strategic goals of The National Health Programme refers to “the improvement of early diagnosis and better effectiveness of the treatment of malignant forms of cervical and breast cancer among women.” It is expected that a widespread system of early detection and treatment of most common malignancies in women will have been implemented by 2005. That involves widespread teaching the skill of self-examination to detect early signs of breast cancer and other disorders leading to it. Self-examination of the breasts is a part of early diagnosis (5). The skill should become one of the personal hygiene habits of every woman, especially girls and young women.

The study tries to answer the following questions: 1. Do young women know the technique of self-examination of the breasts? 2. Where did they learn about the necessity of breast self-examination? 3. Do they self-examine breasts?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was performed among the population of female students from five high schools in Lublin, aged 18–21. A diagnostic survey in the form of a questionnaire was addressed to 125 subjects.

The questions asked the source of knowledge about self-examination of the breasts, subjective evaluation of breasts self-examination technique and the frequency of the examination. Table 1 presents the age structure of the study group.

Table 1. Age structure of the respondents

Number	Respondents age in years				Total
	18	19	20	21	
N	84	20	13	8	125
%	67.2	16	10.4	6.4	100

RESULTS

The level of knowledge about self-examination technique. In the study group 62 (49.6%) girls reported they do not know it they self-examine the breasts in the right way. They have never received any instructions about the technique. However, five (4%) knew the technique, which they learnt at school as part of special educational programme.

Source of knowledge about self-examination of the breasts. The study found all the respondents (100%) had heard about the necessity of systematic self-examination of the breasts. At first place the source of information for them was television and youth magazines. Next was the family – mainly mother, subsequently came the teacher and school pedagogue. None of the respondents mentioned a health care worker as a source of information about the necessity of self-examination of the breasts. The fact is even more upsetting since basic health care workers, family nurses especially, educational institutions, physicians of first contact or gynecologists should actively participate in health education of women during their entire life (2, 3).

Frequency of self-examination of the breasts by young women. In the group examined, as many as 100 (80%) respondents believe that self-examination of the breasts detects potential symptoms of the disease. Actually, only 18 (14.4%) respondents self-examine their breasts once a month, most of them are 18–19 years old. Out of total 125 (100%) women examined 68 (54.4%) have never self-examined their breasts. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of breast self-examination

Frequency of breasts self-examination	Respondents age in years, n = 125								Total	
	18		19		20		21			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Every day	4	3.2	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	3.2
Once a week	7	5.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	5.6
Once a month	8	6.4	5	4	1	0.8	4	3.2	18	14.4
Every 3–4 months	6	4.8	4	3.2	-	-	-	-	10	8
Once a year	13	10.4	1	0.8	2	1.6	2	1.6	18	14.4
Never	46	36.8	10	8	10	8	2	1.6	68	54.4
Total	84	67.2	20	16	13	10.4	8	6.4	125	100

Self-examination of the breasts is an essential technique of early prophylaxis of cancers and is a manifestation of health education. Hence improperly prepared youth take co-responsibility for their own health, which creates an array of hazards and should arouse special concern of health care specialists.

DISCUSSION

Despite enormous progress in the detection and treatment of breast cancer, the mortality rate of that cancer has not decreased. Lack of knowledge among young women about self-detection of alarming symptoms in the breasts is thought to account for that situation (3, 6). As a result the women seek medical consultation late, which makes treatment difficult and complicated.

The results of the study showed that in the group examined the majority of young women do not know the technique of self-examination of the breasts. They heard about the necessity of prophylactic examination in mass media. The results obtained are close to other authors, though they refer to the female population under 25 (1, 3). They demonstrate that the level of women's knowledge about basic methods of self-control remains low. On the whole it can be stated that young women are not prepared adequately to take co-responsibility for their own health. Therefore, it seems right to direct the changes towards widespread of health education into the natural settings, i.e. schools and families. Self-examination of the breasts should become a personal hygiene habit of every young woman.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In the group of 125 (100%) young women, 18–21 years old, only 5 (4%) know the method of self-examination of the breasts.
2. High school students turn to different sources to learn about breast cancer prophylaxis. According to the study mass media are at the first place, family comes next. The respondents reported that health care workers did not provide any knowledge on the subject.
3. The frequency of self-examination of the breasts is relatively low.

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SUMMARY

Increased mortality, morbidity and incidence of neoplastic diseases, malignancy especially, has been observed in Poland for over 20 years. Death rate has increased from 19.34% to 22.13% in male population and from 16.68% to 18.48% in females in 1987–1996. The prognosis for 2010 estimates ca 70,000 deaths in males and ca 40,000 in females. In the male population, among malignancies, lung cancer accounts for the biggest number of deaths. In the female population the first place is taken by breast cancer. Breast cancer is likely to develop in any age, however it increases significantly with age. Among the causes is the lack of knowledge about self-detection of alarming signs and symptoms within breasts that should arouse their concern. The purpose of the study was to answer the following questions: 1. Do young women know the technique of self-examination of the breasts? 2. Where did they learn about the necessity of breast self-examination? 3. Do they self-examine breasts?

Samobadanie piersi jako element profilaktyki nowotworów sutka

Od ponad 20 lat w Polsce obserwuje się wzrost umieralności, chorobowości i zapadalności na nowotwory, szczególnie nowotwory złośliwe. Odsetek zgonów z powodu nowotworów w okresie 1987–1996 zwiększył się u mężczyzn z 19,34% do 22,13%, a u kobiet z 16,68% do 18,48 %. Na podstawie prognozy na rok 2010 można oczekiwać rocznie ok. 70 000 zgonów mężczyzn oraz ok. 40 000 zgonów kobiet. W populacji mężczyzn największa liczba zgonów z powodu nowotworów złośliwych przypada na raka płuc, zaś wśród kobiet na nowotwory sutka. Prawdopodobieństwo zachorowania na raka sutka istnieje w każdym wieku, jednak wyraźnie wzrasta wraz z wiekiem kobiety. Za jedną z przyczyn tego stanu uważa się brak wiedzy wśród kobiet na temat samowykrywania niepokojących objawów w obrębie piersi. Celem niniejszej pracy jest próba odpowiedzi na pytania: 1. Czy młode kobiety znają technikę samobadania piersi? 2. Skąd uzyskały wiedzę na temat konieczności wykonywania samobadania piersi? 3. Czy prowadzą samobadanie piersi?