

Breast Cancer Myths and Facts: A Public Health Perspective

Shambhavi Urmaliya, Dr. Sulekha Tripathi
Sage University Bhopal
Vindhya Institute of Management & Science Satna

Abstract- Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women globally and in India. Despite advancements in early detection and treatment, delayed diagnosis and poor outcomes persist due to widespread myths and misinformation. These myths contribute to stigma, fear, and neglect of timely screening and medical consultation. This article explores common myths surrounding breast cancer, contrasts them with scientific facts, and discusses their implications from a public health perspective. Dispelling myths through culturally appropriate awareness and community-based health education is essential to promote early detection, improve treatment outcomes, and reduce breast cancer mortality, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

Keywords: Breast cancer, myths, awareness, public health, early detection, India

INTRODUCTION

Breast cancer remains a leading public health challenge worldwide. In India, it is the most prevalent cancer among women and the leading cause of cancer-related deaths. Its rising incidence in both rural and urban populations is concerning. While early detection significantly improves survival rates, widespread misinformation and cultural myths continue to hinder timely diagnosis and effective treatment. These deeply rooted beliefs fuel stigma and silence around the disease, often delaying help-seeking behavior. This paper aims to systematically identify prevalent breast cancer myths, clarify them using scientific evidence, and propose culturally appropriate public health strategies for awareness and intervention. Breast

cancer is the most common cancer among Indian women and a major public health concern, with increasing incidence across both rural and urban populations. Despite medical advances, widespread myths and cultural taboos contribute to delayed diagnosis and reduced treatment effectiveness. This paper examines common misconceptions about breast cancer, counters them with scientific evidence, and outlines culturally relevant public health strategies to promote early detection, improve outcomes, and reduce stigma. Breast cancer remains a leading public health challenge worldwide. In India, it is the most prevalent cancer among women and the leading cause of cancer-related deaths. In 2022, breast cancer accounted for approximately 185,000 new cases and 98,000 deaths in India, making it the most common cancer among Indian women (Source: GLOBOCAN 2022). Its rising incidence in both rural and urban populations is concerning. While early detection significantly improves survival rates, widespread misinformation and cultural myths continue to hinder timely diagnosis and effective treatment.

METHODOLOGY

This review draws upon secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journals, national cancer registry reports, and recent public health campaigns. Databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and WHO repositories were searched using keywords including 'breast cancer myths', 'public health India', and 'early detection barriers'. Selected literature and program documents helped contextualize the prevalence of myths and inform evidence-based recommendations.

Common Myths and Scientific Facts

Myth	Fact
Breast cancer only affects women above 50.	While risk increases with age, younger women and even men can develop breast cancer. In India, cases are rising among women in their 30s and 40s [4].
A painless lump in the breast is harmless.	Many breast cancers are painless. Any lump should be examined by a healthcare provider [1].
Wearing underwire bras or tight clothing causes cancer.	No scientific evidence supports this claim. Risk is influenced by hormonal, genetic, and lifestyle factors [7].
Breast cancer is always hereditary.	Only 5–10% of cases are due to inherited genes like BRCA1/2. Most patients have no family history [6].
Mastectomy is the only treatment.	Breast-conserving surgery is effective in many cases. Treatment depends on the stage and type of cancer [11].
Herbal remedies or faith healers can cure cancer.	Alternative therapies delay effective treatment and worsen outcomes. Evidence-based oncology offers the best results [10].
Mammography is dangerous or causes cancer.	It uses safe, low-dose radiation and is a proven life-saving screening tool [12].
Breast cancer is contagious.	Cancer is not an infectious disease. This myth causes unnecessary isolation and stigma [3].

Public Health Implications

Misinformation about breast cancer has critical implications for public health. Myths contribute to delayed diagnosis, fear, stigma, and social isolation. In conservative societies, women may avoid seeking medical help due to shame or fear of judgment. Inadequate awareness also leads to poor treatment adherence and preference for unproven therapies. These factors result in late-stage presentation and reduced survival. Health systems must address these challenges through community-driven, culturally appropriate interventions [2,5,8]. Myths and misinformation surrounding breast cancer have significant public health consequences. One of the most immediate impacts is delayed diagnosis, often driven by fear, social stigma, and misconceptions about the disease. Women may avoid or postpone seeking medical attention due to concerns about loss of femininity, fear of death, or distrust in modern medical systems. This delay contributes to a higher likelihood of late-stage presentation, where treatment becomes more complex and survival rates decrease. In addition, social isolation is frequently reported among patients in rural or conservative settings, where the diagnosis of breast cancer is often hidden due to perceived shame or fear of community judgment. Furthermore, myths contribute to poor treatment adherence, as individuals may prefer unverified alternative therapies or prematurely discontinue conventional treatment. Misinformation thrives in areas with low health literacy, minimal access to

accurate cancer education, and inadequate public health communication systems. These challenges underscore the need for community-based and culturally appropriate interventions to address breast cancer misconceptions and improve health outcomes. A study in rural Maharashtra reported that nearly 42% of women delayed visiting a health centre by over 6 months after noticing symptoms, due to stigma and belief in spiritual remedies. These delays in seeking care often result in advanced-stage diagnoses and lower survival rates. According to a WHO global survey, breast cancer survival rates can exceed 90% with early detection but drop below 50% in low-income settings due to delayed diagnosis and lack of timely treatment.

Strategies to Address Myths: Public Health Interventions

1. Health Education and Awareness Campaigns: Mass media, social platforms, and local language materials should be used to spread accurate information. Infographics, survivor stories, and breast self-examination demonstrations help improve understanding [5].

2. Community Health Worker Engagement: ASHAs and ANMs are vital to rural outreach. With adequate training, they can dispel myths and promote early diagnosis.

3. School- and Workplace-Based Interventions: Integrating breast health education in school curricula and workplace seminars fosters early awareness and empowers women [9].

4. Policy and Health System Strengthening: Programs like NPCDCS should include myth-busting components, and access to low-cost screening must be expanded [4].

Role of Survivors and Testimonials in Myth Dispelling

Cancer survivors can challenge stigma and encourage early treatment through lived experiences. Personal narratives shared via social media, workshops, and local events build trust and normalize discussion. Survivor involvement especially in rural areas improves relatability and reduces fear [9].

Research and Monitoring

Continuous evaluation of myths and attitudes is necessary to tailor public health messaging. Region-specific qualitative research and mobile health platforms can track behavioral changes and deliver timely, personalized education [5].

Global and National Scenario

Globally, breast cancer is the most common cancer among women, with approximately 2.3 million new cases annually and around 685,000 deaths (GLOBOCAN 2022). In India, the age-adjusted incidence rate is 25.8 per 100,000 women, with urban centres like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru reporting higher rates. However, rural mortality remains disproportionately high due to poor awareness, absence of screening infrastructure, and cultural stigma surrounding cancer.

Key Recommendations

- Launch national campaigns featuring survivor stories to normalize screening and reduce stigma.
- Train ASHA and ANM workers to deliver myth-busting education during household visits.
- Deploy mobile mammography vans in underserved rural and peri-urban areas.
- Introduce incentives for early detection, such as insurance discounts for annual check-ups.
- Create culturally tailored, multilingual digital videos that debunk myths and explain symptoms.

- Integrate breast health literacy into school and college curricula for early education

DISCUSSION

The persistence of breast cancer myths indicates a systemic failure in health communication. Education campaigns, digital tools, and community partnerships must address cultural barriers. Integrating myth-busting strategies into national programs will improve screening uptake, reduce stigma, and enhance treatment outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Breast cancer myths significantly obstruct early diagnosis and effective treatment, especially in low-resource settings. These beliefs are shaped by cultural taboos and lack of accurate information. A coordinated public health strategy that includes community education, policy support, and survivor advocacy is essential. Strengthening awareness efforts will empower individuals, improve outcomes, and reduce breast cancer mortality in India and similar contexts. Breast cancer myths hinder early detection and treatment, especially in low-resource settings. Cultural taboos and misinformation contribute to the problem. A coordinated public health approach—combining education, policy, and survivor advocacy—is vital to raise awareness, empower communities, and reduce mortality, particularly in India and similar regions. Dispelling breast cancer myths through education, community engagement, and survivor advocacy is crucial. Public health systems must embed culturally sensitive interventions within national cancer control programs. Empowering communities with evidence-based knowledge can replace fear with informed action. By leveraging survivors' voices, frontline health workers, and digital innovations, India can make significant progress in early detection and reducing breast cancer mortality

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