

# Common Perceptions about Cancer: North Indian Female Cancer Patients and Normal Public's Perspectives about Cancer

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## Abstract

This paper aims to debunk the common myths about cancer that exist among the women of Delhi and NCR Region, in an era where most people feel that cancer related myths are a thing of the past this study highlights the shocking and upcoming myths which are fast catching on in the society, especially with the advent of social media and chat groups. Data from unreliable sources cause more confusion and is fast causing newer myths to develop. Data was collected from 75 cancer breast and 75 cancer cervix patients living in Delhi and NCR region and 150 normal women who had no diagnosis of cancer. Their beliefs about the cause, treatment and survivorship of cancer were collected in a face to face discussion and common myths identified. Several lacunae in the knowledge and false perceptions were identified in the process and resolved and myths identified.

**Keywords:** *Cancer, myths, perceptions, cause, treatment, survivorship.*

## Introduction

Many a times people agree to what may be seemingly correct even if it is not correct, the problem is that these wrong ideas if not corrected soon become assumptions and are passed on from one person to another. Most myths about cancer originate in the same fashion. For example PET CT is a diagnostic modality to detect the spread of cancer which commonly uses radiotracer F-18 fluorodeoxyglucose, or FDG1, a molecule similar to glucose, and it works on the broad mechanism that cancer cells being more metabolically active will uptake the dye fast and appear as hotspots. With the advent of this modality there was a wide surge in the myth that sugar alone feeds cancer cells and one may cure himself of cancer by cutting down sugars. The misinterpretation of facts and fast spread by social media is a threat to the gullible and innocent and an unnecessary stress to others. This paper aims to assess the current popular myths among cancer survivors and normal women population of Delhi and NCR region.

**Methodology:** This study used an exploratory survey method; data was collected from 75 cancer breast and 75 cancer cervix patients living in Delhi and NCR region and 150 normal women who had no diagnosis of cancer. Patients were reached using the snowball sampling method, different cancer survivor support

groups were reached and their members contacted individually. 150 normal women were reached in two colonies of Delhi for data collection using convenient sampling method. Care was taken as to not introduce any myths so this data was collected using only FOUR open ended questions

- What do you think causes cancer?
- Why do you think cancer cases are on a rise these days?
- How do you think cancer can be treated?
- Do you think cancer survivors can do all normal activities?

## Results

All the data obtained was tabulated (**Table 1**) and percentages were assessed for the same. Many women choose not to answer the entire question or had a recurring response in all questions, such responses were not tabulated. Each opinion was considered as unique and any response that came more than 1 time was included in the table. Most women who lived in the same area had similar beliefs and it was very interesting to observe that even cancer survivors who stayed in hospitals for months for their treatment had several unresolved myths which they assumed to be true.

**Table 1: Myths and percentage of women affirming it**

S. No .	Ques.	Myth prevalent	No. and percentage of women who perceive it as truth			
			Cancer survivors	Percentage	Normal population	Percentage
1	What do you think causes cancer?	a. Not squeezing the breast among newborn girls to bring out witches milk is causing lumps later	88	58.6%	100	66.6%
		b. Not taking proper sexual abstinence precaution during menstruation causes cervical cancer	50	33.3%	110	73.3%
		c. Not drinking haldi milk regularly during menses can cause uterine malignancies	40	26.6%	94	62.6%
		d. Deficiency of vitamins can cause cancer	30	20%	44	29.3%
		e. Touch of a cancer patient/ Contact transmission	11	7.3%	89	59.3%
		f. Mobile phone usage	70	46.6%	99	66%
		g. If no one in the family have cancer, one will not get cancer	100	66.6%	133	88.6%
		h. Too much sugar in diet	40	33.3%	96	64%
2.	Why do you think cancer cases are on a rise these days?	a. Wearing black undergarments	80	53.3%	90	60%
		b. Too much deodorant	75	50%	67	44.6%
		c. Consuming things earned with black money can cause cancer	38	25.3%	11	7.3%
		d. Too much pollution	130	86.6%	140	93.3%
		e. Eating cheese and fast foods	60	40%	79	52.6%
		f. Living near power lines	30	20%	24	16%
3.	How do you think cancer can be treated?	a. Cancer spreads faster if exposed to air	35	29.1%	89	59.3%
		b. Biopsy causes cancer to spread	68	45.3%	127	84.6%
		c. Herbal treatment can cure cancer	30	20%	100	66.6%
		d. Vitamin supplements can cure cancer	20	13.3%	90	60%
		e. Beetroot juice everyday can cure cancer	49	32.6%	22	14.6%
		f. Bitter almonds everyday can cure cancer	77	51.3%	50	33.3%
		g. Ginger garlic consumption everyday can cure cancer	12	8%	30	20%
		h. Positive attitude alone can cure cancer	10	6.6%	50	33.3%
		i. Yoga and exercises everyday can cure cancer	16	10.6%	44	29.3%
4.	Do you think a cancer survivor can do all normal activities?	a. Cancer is equal to death sentence	20	13.3%	104	69.3%
		b. Cancer can never be completely cured	9	6%	102	68%
		c. Cancer survivor must be kept away from work	64	42.6%	108	72%
		d. Maximum survival after cancer care is <5 year	50	33.3%	130	86.6%
		e. Cancer survivors will never get their hair back	12	8%	133	88.6%
		f. Cancer survivors cannot be sexually active	50	33.3%	140	93.3%
		g. Cancer survivors must not be given normal diet	35	23.3%	130	86.6%
		h. Cancer survivors must not be exposed to children and pregnant women	12	8%	118	78.6%

## Important Findings and Discussion

When coming to the causes of cancer 88.6% of the normal population felt that if no one in their family had cancer they will not get it, even among the survivors 66.6% of women felt so. Recent Globocan 2018 statistics say that one in 5 men and one in 6 women are prone to get cancer in their lifetime, such a perception is a major obstacle to health seeking behaviours and uptake of cancer screening.

73.3% of people felt that Not taking proper sexual abstinence precaution during menstruation causes cervical cancer which can lead to stigmatization of this cancer without any scientific evidence.

62.6% of normal people and 26.6% of survivors felt that not drinking haldi milk regularly during menses can cause uterine malignancies, in general the survivor group had lesser myths/ false perceptions, but there is no research evidence which would say that haldi milk has a protective factor for uterine malignancies. More studies need to be done on this fact.

59.3% of normal population felt that touch of a cancer patient/ Contact transmission can be a cause of cancer, what is disturbing here is the fact that even among survivors who took treatment 7.3% of the group felt that cancer can spread via contact.

66% of normal people and 46.6% survivors felt that Mobile phone usage can cause cancer.

When asked why you think cancer cases are on a rise these days, 93.3% of normal people and 86.6% of survivors felt too much pollution is the root cause for cancer and it's not entirely a myth. Studies have shown that pollution can cause certain types of cancer<sup>2</sup>. Other point's raised were Wearing black undergarments, too much deodorant which continues to be a recurring theme in research literature<sup>4</sup>, consuming things earned with black money, Eating cheese and fast foods and living near power lines.

Varieties of responses were got when people were asked about cancer treatment. 84.6% of people felt that Biopsy causes cancer to spread, what's alarming is the fact that 45.3% of survivors who have successfully been treated at a hospital also felt the same. Around 60% people felt that cancer spreads faster if exposed to air. 66.6% of people felt that herbs and alternative treatment can cure cancer. Other important themes which emerged were use of vitamin supplements, beet root juice, bitter

almonds, and ginger garlic consumption; many felt that positive attitude alone can cure cancer.

When asked about survivorship most people (93.3%) felt that Cancer survivors cannot be sexually active, one third of the cancer survivors in the study felt the same. Possibly because the medical fraternity frequently discusses cancer in terms of 5 and 10 year survival rates a majority of normal population and one third of the survivors in the study felt that maximum survival after cancer is 5 years. Other themes that need to be clarified are Cancer can never be completely cured, Cancer survivor must be kept away from work, and Cancer survivors must not be exposed to children and pregnant women.

## Conclusion

In short it can be summarized that cancer related myths continue to be and grow in the society. And what we need to remember is that there is a great need to continuously educate people on the same.

Future scope: myths about cancer tend to be regional in nature, the myth that is so prevalent in one geographic area may not exist in another at all. More regional studies need to be done to know about these aspects of cancer.

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