

**For Immediate Release  
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**STUDY FINDS GAPS IN BREAST CANCER KNOWLEDGE AMONG  
ONTARIO WOMEN**

*First-of-its-kind research initiative highlights need to correct misconceptions,  
provide more information*

**TORONTO** – Despite a high level of breast cancer awareness and concern, a recent public opinion survey has revealed that women in Ontario have misconceptions about this important health issue in the areas of incidence and risk, signs and symptoms and breast cancer screening practices.

The survey findings have been released as part of *Up Front: New Perspectives on Breast Cancer*, a comprehensive inquiry into women’s experience with breast cancer, led by the Ontario Chapter of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation in partnership with several prominent breast cancer stakeholders. The October 2005 survey—conducted by the Institute of Social Research at York University and funded by RE/MAX Ontario-Atlantic Canada and the Princess Margaret Hospital Foundation Breast Centre Women’s Committee—polled 800 Ontario women who had not been diagnosed with breast cancer about their knowledge, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about the disease.

“Significant progress has been made in raising awareness of breast cancer over the past 20 years, but the amount of information can be overwhelming to digest, and there are still some communities where information is limited,” says Sharon Wood, executive director, Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation - Ontario Chapter. “This study has told us about specific gaps in women’s knowledge about breast cancer, which are important for us to understand so we can address women’s misconceptions and fears, and help to clarify those areas going forward.”

Forty per cent of survey respondents believe breast cancer is the most important health issue facing women today. The survey results suggest a need to reach out to women of non-European descent and to women who report having a low income as both groups are less informed about breast cancer and less likely to participate in risk reduction behaviours. This is particularly important since breast cancer authorities believe the breast cancer mortality rate could be decreased by 30 per cent through screening mammography.

### **Misconceptions about risk**

The survey results reveal misconceptions about breast cancer risk and incidence, including:

- 38 per cent of participants surveyed believe they are likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer. The reality is that an estimated 12 per cent of women will develop the disease by the time they reach the age of 80.
- More than one third of women surveyed (35%) believe heredity is the most important factor affecting breast cancer risk and subsequently, survey participants without a family history of breast cancer believe they are less at risk. However, only five to 10 per cent of breast cancer cases can actually be linked to family history.
- Respondents over the age of 50 felt less susceptible to breast cancer. In fact, the likelihood of developing breast cancer is known to increase with age.

### **Most women can name only one symptom**

The survey also highlighted the need to help women identify signs and symptoms of breast cancer. Slightly over half of the women surveyed were able to name only one symptom (a lump in the breast) and 11 per cent were unable to name any. Recognition of signs and symptoms was especially low among women with less education and lower incomes and women not born in Canada.

“While a lump in the breast is the most commonly-known symptom of breast cancer, it is not the only one,” says Wood. “By knowing the other signs and symptoms of breast cancer and becoming aware what is normal for them, women can be better prepared to recognize changes in their breasts that might be a sign of breast cancer.”

### **Many women are getting mammograms, but others are not sure when to go**

A mammogram (x-ray of the breast) by an accredited provider is recognized as the provincial standard for early detection of breast cancer, and it is recommended that women over 50 have a mammogram once every two years.

Only 34 per cent of survey respondents correctly identified Ontario’s target age of 50 for having a mammogram. The majority of women (45%) believed it was 40. Respondents indicated that a letter sent to them by the health care system would encourage them to sign up for the Ontario Breast Screening Program at the appropriate time.

Fifty-four per cent of survey respondents reported having ever had a mammogram, including 92 per cent of women over 50. According to Cancer Care Ontario, the agency that oversees the Ontario Breast Screening Program (OBSP), just over 50 per cent of women over the age of 50 are being screened, but it’s challenging to get an exact number because many women have mammograms at facilities that are not a part of the OBSP.

“Screening through the OBSP has important quality advantages that help women get screened regularly, by promoting screening for the high-risk age group, following up with them and tracking their prognosis through a central registry,” says Dr. Verna Mai, director of screening for Cancer Care Ontario.

Of women who reported having ever had a mammogram, 77 per cent reported having one in the past two years. Seventy-three per cent of these respondents were 50 and above.

“While many women have mammograms, it’s important that women over 50 get screened every two years so that any new changes can be caught early,” says Mai.

#### **Additional information to be shared at community consultations**

Along with the public opinion survey, the *Up Front* project is also learning about the breast cancer care system from the perspective of people who have experienced it directly. Input has been gathered from individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and regions of the province, including women living with breast cancer, their personal caregivers, and health care professionals. This information, along with the learnings from the public opinion survey, will be shared with the public at upcoming community consultations in Toronto, Ottawa, London, Sudbury and Timmins. A final report complete with action-based recommendations will be released in fall 2006.

“The *Up Front* project is a timely opportunity to build relationships within the entire cancer care community and will act as a catalyst for major change,” says the Foundation’s Wood.

#### **About *Up Front: New Perspectives on Breast Cancer***

*Up Front: New Perspectives on Breast Cancer* is a research initiative led by the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation - Ontario Chapter in collaboration with Willow Breast Cancer Resource and Support Services, the Canadian Breast Cancer Network, the Ontario Breast Screening Program, and the Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) Foundation and its Breast Centre Women’s Committee. Through multi-phased research and community-based consultations in Ottawa, London, the Greater Toronto Area, Sudbury and Timmins, *Up Front* aims to identify and create opportunities for improved coordination of breast cancer care and information in Ontario.

*Up Front* has received funding from the Trillium Foundation, the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation - Ontario Chapter, RE/MAX Ontario-Atlantic Canada, and the PMH Foundation Breast Centre Women’s Committee. The public opinion survey was made possible thanks to targeted contributions by RE/MAX Ontario-Atlantic Canada and the PMH Foundation Breast Centre Women’s Committee.

For more information, please visit [www.cbcf.org/ontario](http://www.cbcf.org/ontario).

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