PRESS RELEASE

Major study of 7,663 Malaysian women shows that breastfeeding, physical activity and soy intake are protective against breast cancer

Kuala Lumpur, 14 September 2018 – Three protective factors that reduce the risk of developing breast cancer have been identified by a major Malaysian study involving thousands of Malaysian women.

The results, published today in the journal PLOS ONE, 13, are significant as the study is the largest ever conducted in Malaysia and included 3,683 breast cancer cases and 3,980 healthy women from University Malaya Medical Centre and Subang Jaya Medical Centre. This study shows that breastfeeding, and regular physical activity and soy intake may protect Malaysian women against breast cancer and these results are consistent with similar studies in other countries.

The findings are from the Malaysian Breast Cancer (MyBrCA) genetic study, and the Malaysian Mammographic Density (MyMammo) study which are part of the ongoing studies at Cancer Research Malaysia that examine genetics, lifestyle, hormonal, reproductive and mammographic factors and their association with the risk of developing breast cancer.

Breast cancer incidence in Malaysia is expected to rise rapidly, as the country is undergoing a transition toward a more Westernized diet that is high in fat and sugar, increasingly sedentary lifestyle, and reduced family size.

Professor Dato' Yip Cheng Har, Emeritus Professor from the University of Malaya, Consultant Breast Surgeon at Ramsay Sime Darby Healthcare and one of the lead clinicians of this study, says, "these findings are significant because they add to an understanding of the hormonal, reproductive and lifestyle factors associated with breast cancer among Malaysian women. The majority of breast cancer studies are

conducted among Europeans and few have examined Malaysian women. Today's results will help in pushing forward public awareness campaign so that we could reduce breast cancer incidence in Malaysia."

The study shows that women who breastfeed more than 12 months are 70% less likely to develop breast cancer. "As more women enter the workforce, in view of the benefits of breastfeeding, we feel that it's important for employers to take into consideration of the results of this study and provide a more supportive environment to encourage female employees to continue breastfeeding," commented Dr. Tan Min Min, a post-doctoral research fellow from the University of Nottingham Malaysia and one of the researchers of the study.

"We have been collecting data related to breast cancer since 1993 and of women attending opportunistic mammogram since 2015 in University Malaya Medical Centre. The current large scale study enables us to capture the landscape of breast cancer in Malaysia," added Professor Nur Aishah Mohd Taib, Consultant Breast Surgeon and the lead clinician from University of Malaya.

"Women who are physically active are known to have reduced risk of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancers. The results published today confirm that women who are physically active have about 30-60% reduced risk of developing breast cancer," added Associate Professor Ho Weang Kee, the lead statistician in the study from University of Nottingham.

Although the number of women who reported the intake of soy is relatively low in this study, the results show that consuming at least a cup of soy milk or a serving of soy products once a week is associated with about 80% and 60% reduced risk of developing breast cancer, respectively. To examine the effect of soy and breast cancer more extensively, Cancer Research Malaysia is now partnering with the University of Nottingham Malaysia, Subang Jaya Medical Centre and the University of Malaya to determine whether women who start to consume soy in their 40s and 50s can experience reduced breast cancer risk.

"Breast cancer incidence is rising in Malaysia, and the understanding of the risk factors of the disease is made possible through large case-control studies such as the MyBrCa genetic study. We are funded entirely by charity and research grants, and we hope to continue to make important contributions in the prevention and early detection of breast cancer in Malaysia," concluded Professor Teo Soo Hwang, Chief Executive Officer of Cancer Research Malaysia and the lead investigator of the study.

Reference

Min-Min Tan, et al. A case-control study of breast cancer risk factors in 7,663 women in Malaysia. PLOS ONE, 14 Sept 2018.

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