ILLNESS PERCEPTIONS IN BRAZILIAN WOMEN WITH CERVICAL CANCER, WOMEN WITH PRECURSORY LESIONS AND HEALTHY WOMEN

Elisa Kern de Castro¹, Magnoria Aretz¹, Priscila Lawrenz¹, Fernanda Bittencourt Romeiro¹ & Silvia Abduch Haas²

¹ Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, Brasil
² Hospital Santa Rita, Porto Alegre, Brasil

Abstract

Purpose: to compare the perceptions about cervical cancer in: 1) women with cervical cancer, 2) women with precursory lesions; and 3) healthy women. Participants were 150 adult women from southern Brazil.


Results showed significant differences between groups in the dimensions of timeline cyclic and identity, indicating that healthy women perceived more symptoms, but as more cyclical (acute/chronic) compared to the other two groups. With regard to the causes of illness, women with cancer more often attributed it to their emotional state/stress/concerns than healthy women or those with precursory lesions.

Key words: Illness perception, illness representations, cancer, cervical cancer, human papilloma virus.

Resumen

Objetivo: comparar las percepciones sobre el cáncer de cuello uterino en: 1) las mujeres con cáncer de cuello uterino, 2) las mujeres con lesiones precursoras, y 3) las mujeres sanas. Los participantes fueron 150 mujeres adultas procedentes del sur de Brasil.

Medidas: Formulario de datos sociodemográficos y clínicos, Illness Perception Questionnaire – Revised and Illness Perception Questionnaire for healthy people

Los resultados mostraron diferencias significativas entre los grupos en las dimensiones curso cíclico e identidad, lo que indica que las mujeres sanas perciben más síntomas, pero dependen más del curso cíclico (agudo/crónico) en comparación con los otros dos grupos. Con respecto a las causas de enfermedad, las mujeres con cáncer lo atribuyen con más frecuencia a su estado emocional/estrés/preocupsiones que las mujeres sanas o con lesiones precursoras.

Palabras clave: Percepción de la enfermedad; representaciones de la enfermedad, el cáncer, el cáncer cervical, el virus del papiloma humano.
INTRODUCTION

The cervical cancer is the second highest cause of incidents of cancer among Brazilian women\(^1\). This type of cancer has no symptoms in its precursory stages, which makes it very difficult to diagnose. It impacts, more often, women aged between 35 and 55 years old\(^2\). Around 90% of cases of the disease are related to being infected by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), and 44% are caused due to precursory lesions caused by viruses. In addition, poor hygiene, precursory onset of sexual activity, multiple partners, smoking, prolonged use of oral contraceptives and low intake of vitamins are considered risk factors for cervical cancer\(^1\).

When cervical cancer is diagnosed at a precursory stage, the healing potential is high\(^1,3\). Despite being a type of cancer with a good prognosis, mortality rates are still high in Brazil\(^2\) and may be related to poor treatment in the public health services. Although there is an increase in precursory diagnosis in the country\(^1\), there still is not a noted the drop in the number of deaths.

According to the Common-Sense Model, illness perceptions are related to the thoughts and emotions derived from the experience of being sick and relate to individual beliefs about health / illness\(^4\). In this sense, the representational content can be linked to the risks that the disease can bring to an individual’s health. The self-regulation is linked, in part, to the assessment of symptoms and knowledge, beliefs and risk perceptions, as being factors that can affect an individual’s behavior\(^5\). Although some people might go through similar experiences, the way that illness perceptions are established is different because each individual lives in a unique way and have their own perceptions about such an illness\(^6\).

A systematic review of the literature on illness perception and cancer\(^7\) showed that none of them focused on perceptions about cervical cancer. In regard of the illness perceptions in healthy people, Figueiras and Alves\(^8\) emphasize that they can serve as guides for behavior in relation to prevention. Soon, they imply that thoughts precede the preventive measures for the individual so that he or she does not get sick, promoting health. Whereas illness perceptions appear to be precursors of behavior and coping with the disease, it may be useful to assess not only the perceptions of sick people, but also those of healthy people about a particular disease, to guide disease prevention behaviors. The objective of this study is to evaluate and compare the illness perceptions in women with cervical cancer, women with precursory lesions and healthy women.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Design: Cross-sectional study.

Sample: 150 adult women who were divided into three groups:

- Group 1: 50 women diagnosed with cervical cancer and treated in accordance with medical advice;
- Group 2: 50 women with uterine cancer precursory lesions;
- Group 3: 50 women without cancer, without precursory lesions and without known HPV infection.

The selection of participants in group 1 occurred consecutively among those who were in outpatient treatment for cancer in a hospital in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, between April - September 2011. The other participants in groups 2 and 3 were also recruited in a consecutive manner in the gynecology outpatient clinic of the same hospital, with the intention being to pair them with participants in group 1 with the variable age groups and education levels. The response rate to participate in the study