

New report highlights key measures to improve breast cancer outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa

Lyon, France, 8 March 2021 – In conjunction with International Women’s Day and today’s launch of the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Breast Cancer Initiative, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has released an IARC Evidence Summary Brief about the African Breast Cancer - Disparities in Outcomes Study ([ABC-DO](#)). This report, titled “Breast Cancer Outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa”, is the first in a series of scientific Evidence Summary Briefs published by IARC to call attention to the findings of evidence-based studies in key aspects of cancer prevention.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer type diagnosed in women in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2020, 129 000 women in this region were newly diagnosed with the disease. Unfortunately, survival of these women is generally low, and on average 50% of women diagnosed with breast cancer in sub-Saharan Africa will have died within 3 years of diagnosis.

ABC-DO is based on five sub-Saharan African countries: Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia. The study assesses the various barriers to diagnosis, treatment, and care and highlights public health measures that could significantly improve breast cancer survival as well as the quality of life of women affected by the disease in this region.

The study is following the breast cancer journeys of 2200 women from the time of diagnosis, through the treatment period, and beyond. It explores challenges to improving survival, linked to the social, cultural, and health system contexts in these countries.

“One of the key findings of ABC-DO is that in sub-Saharan African countries, in general advanced stage at diagnosis and lack of timely access to appropriate treatment contributed equally to the excess of breast cancer deaths,” says IARC scientist Dr Valerie McCormack, the coordinator of ABC-DO.

The IARC Evidence Summary Brief released today highlights a wide range of context-specific features of the breast cancer journey, extending to the wider intergenerational impacts of breast cancer deaths. The brief underscores three strategies for countries to reduce breast cancer deaths:

- improving breast cancer awareness among women, communities, and health professionals;
- supporting rapid (< 2 months) diagnostic investigations of suspected breast cancers; and
- improving access to systemic therapy and surgery and supporting completion of treatment courses.

“There is an urgent need to provide population-wide affordable cancer care through universal health-care coverage,” says IARC Director Dr Elisabete Weiderpass. “Implementation studies will now be conducted to strengthen critical weak points in the breast cancer journey that were identified by ABC-DO.”

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The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is part of the World Health Organization. Its mission is to coordinate and conduct research on the causes of human cancer, the mechanisms of carcinogenesis, and to develop scientific strategies for cancer control. The Agency is involved in both epidemiological and laboratory research and disseminates scientific information through publications, meetings, courses, and fellowships. If you wish your name to be removed from our press release emailing list, please write to com@iarc.fr.