Quarter of healthy years lost to breast cancer are due to lifestyle factors, research finds

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More than a quarter of healthy years lost to breast cancer are due to lifestyle factors such as red meat intake and smoking, according to the largest study of its kind.



The study, published in the Lancet Oncology, used data from populationbased cancer registries to produce a comprehensive analysis of breast cancer and its risk factors.

The data used, spanning from 1990 to 2023 from more than 200 countries, was also used to produce forecasts of trends regarding breast cancer up to 2050. In the UK, about one in seven women will develop the disease in their lifetime.

New breast cancer cases in women are predicted to rise by a third globally, from 2.3m in 2023 to more than 3.5m in 2050, according to the analysis by the Global Burden of Disease Study Breast Cancer Collaborators.

The findings also suggest that maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including not smoking, doing sufficient physical activity, lowering red meat consumption, and having a healthy BMI may prevent more than a quarter of healthy years lost to illness and premature death due to breast cancer worldwide. The figures follow previous research by Cancer Research UK, which found that more than four in 10 UK cancer cases were preventable through lifestyle changes.

Kayleigh Bhangdia, from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington and lead author of the study, said: “Breast cancer continues to take a profound toll on women’s lives and communities. While those in high-income countries typically benefit from screening and more timely diagnosis and comprehensive treatment strategies, the mounting burden of breast cancer is shifting to lowand lower middleincome countries where individuals often face laterstage diagnosis, more limited access to quality care and higher death rates that are threatening to eclipse progress in women’s health.”

The analysis found that, globally in 2023, three times as many new breast cancer cases were diagnosed in women aged 55 or older compared with women aged 20-54 (161 cases per 100,000 women, compared with 50).

But the rates of new cases in women aged between 20 and 54 have risen by nearly a third (29%) since 1990, while rates in older women have not changed substantially.

In 2023, 28% of the global breast cancer burden (6.8m years of healthy life lost to disability, illness and early death) was linked to six potentially modifiable risk factors. High red meat consumption had the biggest impact (linked to nearly 11% of all healthy life lost), followed by tobacco use including secondhand smoke (8%), high blood sugar (6%), high body mass index (4%), high alcohol use and low physical activity (both 2%).

Claire Rowney, the chief executive of Breast Cancer Now, said: "This new global study is a stark reminder that breast cancer is a disease that continues to take and rip apart far too many lives, not just here but around the world.

"We're determined to realise our bold ambition that by 2050, everyone with breast cancer will live and live well, and we're accelerating progress through building global collaborations with researchers and funders, as together we can go further, faster to ensure that every woman, no matter where she lives, can access early diagnosis, effective treatment and the support she needs."

Sophie Brooks, health information manager at Cancer Research UK said: "These figures are a sad reminder of the heavy toll breast cancer continues to take on women around the world.

"Prevention remains a key way to reduce rates, with a significant number of cases globally linked to preventable factors like smoking, overweight and obesity, and alcohol."