

Can Stress Vulnerability Predict Patients Reactivity to Breast Cancer Diagnosis?

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BACKGROUND

Breast cancer diagnosis represents a major stressor, a threat to individual integrity, requiring a considerable effort to a successful adjustment. From the perspective of a model of emotion regulation, present research intends to characterize and relate stress vulnerability to emotional distress and cortisol levels, as psychobiological stress reactivity measures, in a sample of breast cancer patients compared to control subjects.

METHOD

Patients were approached before the beginning of any treatment. After informed consent, they completed the National Comprehensive Cancer Network Distress Thermometer and the Stress Vulnerability Questionnaire, among other measures. Salivar cortisol samples were collected in five moments, during a 24 hours period.

RESULTS

Sample included 67 females, 32 patients and 35 controls. Patients mean age was 42.8 years, 66% had college or superior education and 72% had no family history of breast cancer. Mean value of Distress Thermometer (from 0 to 10), was 6,4 in patients, significantly higher than in controls (4,6). Cortisol levels at waking, 1hour after waking and at 4pm were higher in patients, although not significantly facing controls. Stress Vulnerability Total score was significantly higher in control group (31,2 / 36,2; $p=0,49$), however below cut off point in both groups. Linear regression analysis showed that, in patients, stress vulnerability predicted levels of distress but, despite several observed correlations, did not predicted cortisol measures.

CONCLUSIONS

These results seem to reflect the early psychological impact of cancer diagnosis in patients, not enough to predict biological reactivity measures, such as cortisol levels.