

## Prevalence of Fear of Death among Young Breast Cancer Patients during Adjuvant Endocrine Therapy: Results from a Portuguese Cohort

### Prevalência do Medo de Morrer em Doentes Jovens com Cancro de Mama Durante a Hormonoterapia Adjuvante: Resultados de uma Coorte Portuguesa

**Keywords:** Antineoplastic Agents, Hormonal; Anxiety; Breast Neoplasms; Quality of Life

**Palavras-chave:** Ansiedade; Antineoplásicos Hormonais; Neoplasias da Mama; Qualidade de Vida

A breast cancer diagnosis can greatly impact many young women and trigger a series of psychological and social challenges, particularly a fear of death or recurrence. This type of fear can cause physical and mental disorders affecting quality of life (QOL) in those with breast cancer.<sup>1</sup> Endocrine therapy (ET) has also been associated with the worsening of anxiety symptoms.<sup>2,3</sup> The precipitating factors must be recognized and identified in order to develop appropriate strategies for these patients. Both QOL and the impact of ET can be measured through questionnaires. The Functional Assessment of Cancer Treatment (FACT) and its endocrine subscale, FACT-ES v4, are validated QOL questionnaires specific to women with both breast cancer and endocrine symptoms.<sup>4</sup>

We aimed to use the FACT (version 4) to investigate the prevalence of fear of death in young breast cancer patients during adjuvant ET.

This cross-sectional study included young breast cancer patients prescribed adjuvant ET (tamoxifen, aromatase inhibitors, or luteinizing-hormone-releasing hormone analogues)

in three Portuguese hospitals. Patient demographics and both clinical and histopathological data were recorded in a Microsoft Excel 2018 spreadsheet. We excluded patients on ET for less than 12 months, those who discontinued ET for more than three months, and those aged over 45 years old. Using the Portuguese versions of the FACT and FACT-ES (version 4) questionnaires, fear of death and associated factors were assessed. The chi-squared test was used to study the association between each variable and fear of death.

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of each institution.

Our sample included 70 young female breast cancer patients. The mean age was 41.6 years. Each patient received adjuvant chemotherapy, and mean ET duration was 3.5 years. We tallied the answers to the question, "I worry about dying" for each of the specified responses: "not at all," "a little bit," "somewhat," "quite a bit," or "very much" (Fig. 1). Only 20 patients (28.6%) denied being worried about fear of dying.

Death anxiety was not associated with age, marital status, employment status, ET, or sexual activity (all  $p > 0.05$ ). However, we found a significant association with accepting the disease ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, the fear of death was lower when the patient accepted the disease ( $p < 0.05$ ) and also when the patient had good social and family support ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Most patients showed some degree of fear of death. A psychological approach facilitating acceptance of the disease could improve the quality of life of these patients. Health care providers should also evaluate the social and family support given to these patients.

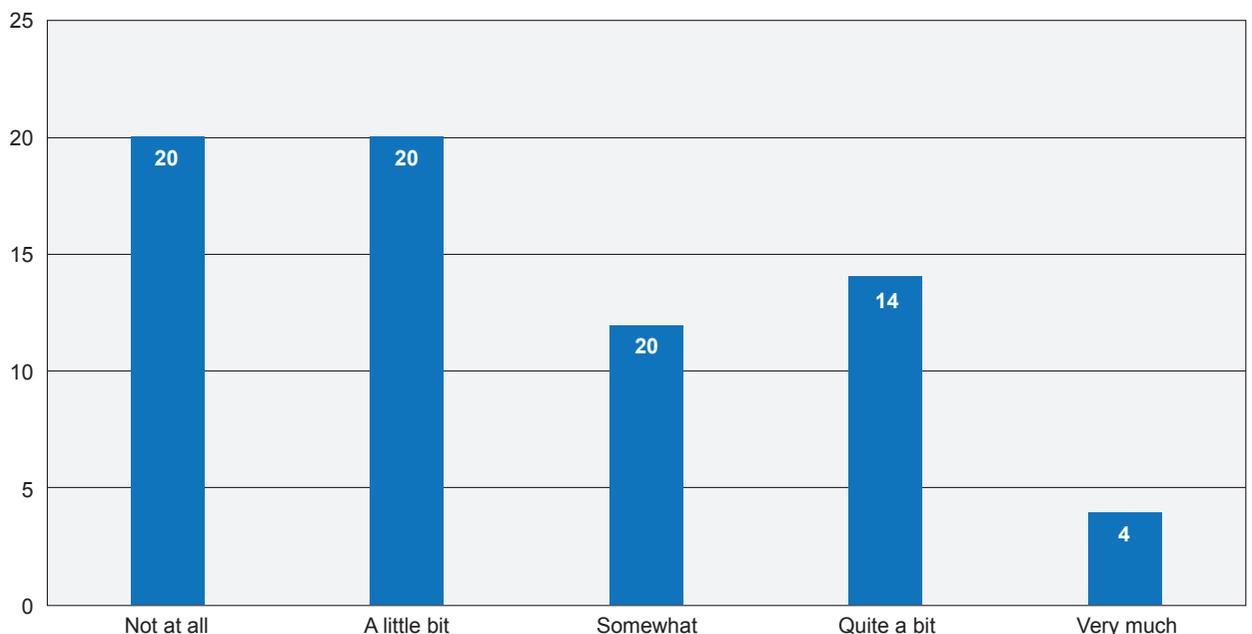


Figure 1 – Patient responses to "I worry about dying"

## PROTECTION OF HUMANS AND ANIMALS

The authors declare that the procedures were followed according to the regulations established by the Clinical Research and Ethics Committee and to the 2013 Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association.

## DATA CONFIDENTIALITY

The authors declare having followed the protocols in use at their working center regarding patients' data publication.

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Paulo LUZ✉<sup>1,2</sup>, Amanda NOBRE CARVALHO<sup>3</sup>, Alicia OLIVEIRA<sup>4</sup>, Maria MENEZES<sup>4</sup>, Rui DINIS<sup>1</sup>, Beatriz GOSALBEZ<sup>1</sup>

1. Medical Oncology Department. Centro Hospitalar Universitário do Algarve. Faro. Portugal.

2. Research Center for Biosciences and Health Technologies. Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias. Lisboa. Portugal.

3. Centro Hospitalar Entre Douro e Vouga. Santa Maria da Feira. Portugal.

4. Serviço de Oncologia. Hospital Espírito Santo. Évora. Portugal.

Autor correspondente: Paulo Luz. [p\\_luz@msn.com](mailto:p_luz@msn.com)

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## PATIENT CONSENT

Obtained.

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