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Economic impact 'huge' for breast cancer patients, report says

By Jill Mahoney
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Many lost income, jobs and depleted their savings, new study suggests

Many Canadian women diagnosed with breast cancer suffer long-term economic hardships, including depleting their savings and losing their jobs, according to a new report.

The study by the Canadian Breast Cancer Network (CBCN) found that 80 per cent of patients experienced financial repercussions, with an average \$12,000, or 10 per cent, drop in annual household income.

"The economic impact of breast cancer is huge and, in many cases, devastating for patients and their families," says the report, released Thursday.

The study, which CBCN says is the first to examine the financial and labour impacts of breast cancer, is based on a survey conducted last year of 446 Canadians with the disease.

While provincial health-care plans cover physicians' services and most in-hospital costs, other aspects of treatment - such as drugs, medical supplies and prosthetics - are often borne by patients or their private insurance plans.

The report highlights the shortfall in Employment Insurance benefit coverage. While EI provides a maximum of 15 weeks of sickness benefits, the average treatment length is 38 weeks, the study says. Two-thirds of respondents were off work for at least 16 weeks.

To cover treatment costs and make up for lost income, 44 per cent of those surveyed depleted their savings and retirement funds and 27 per cent took on debt.

Most respondents - 73 per cent - had full- or part-time jobs at the time of their diagnosis. Of those, 16 per cent had their jobs terminated while they underwent treatment and 17 per cent were unable to return to their previous position with the same title and


salary. Twenty-one per cent said they returned to work because of financial pressures before they were fully able. One-fifth quit because of work-related restrictions, treatment side effects, fatigue or pain.

Patients who had chemotherapy had the greatest drop in family income, took more time off work and were more likely to quit their jobs.

The survey also found that one-third of breast cancer patients believed their financial struggles would have long-term negative effects on their health.

An estimated 22,700 Canadian women and 180 men are diagnosed with breast cancer annually.

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