

'Jolie effect' on cancer screening



Washington: Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie's decision to undergo double mastectomy after testing positive for a gene linked to an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancers influenced some women's intentions to undergo similar genetic testing, a new US study has found.

Angelina Jolie received widespread media attention in 2013 when she announced that she had tested positive for BRCA1, a gene associated with an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancers, and subsequently had her breasts removed.

"We put a questionnaire online within three days of Jolie's announcement, to see if the announcement influenced anyone's intention to get genetic testing," said lead author Kami Kosenko, an associate professor of communication at North Carolina State University.

"We also wanted to see if there were any variables, such as whether people felt they identified with Jolie, that were associated with people who were influenced by Jolie's announcement," said Kosenko.

In the study, 356 people from US completed the questionnaire, of which 295 were aware of Jolie's announcement.

Of the 229 female study participants, researchers found that 30 per cent intended to get tested to see if they carried the BRCA1 gene, with 23 per cent saying they would probably get tested and 7 per cent saying they would definitely get tested.

"Women who identified more strongly with Jolie were more likely to intend to get the genetic testing regardless of whether they had a family history of cancer than women who did have a family history of cancer but did not identify with Jolie," Kosenko said.

"The same was true of women who felt they had some sort of parasocial relationship with Jolie, meaning they viewed her as a friend. This means that Jolie's speaking out definitely had an impact," Kosenko said.

The findings suggest that when it comes to a celebrity's impact on the public, that impact depends in part on the extent to which the public identifies with the celebrity.

In other words, there appears to be something about particular celebrities that engenders more public interest and concern, the researchers said.

"This indicates that health practitioners and advocates may want to consider how relatable a celebrity is with the target audience when searching for a celebrity spokesperson," Kosenko said.

"However, more work needs to be done to help us understand what makes a celebrity relatable. For example, in our survey, non-white women were more likely to identify with Jolie than white women were. Why is that? We don't know," she said.