'Breast cancer varies for women of different ethnicities'

by Tan Weizhen
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SINGAPORE - Malay women fared worse than Chinese or Indian women after being diagnosed with breast cancer, a study of over 5,200 patients in Singapore and Malaysia has found.

Researchers pointed to possible reasons such as differences in genetic make-up, as well as socio-economic, lifestyle and even cultural factors.

They were found to be typically diagnosed with more aggressive, larger tumours, and had the lowest survival rate, as compared to the other two ethnic groups.

At the time of diagnosis, they were also at a significantly younger age and the cancer would usually be at a later stage.

Malay female patients were also less likely to complete their treatment for non-metastatic tumours, which may involve surgery and radiotherapy.

Such findings are significant, in possibly tailoring treatment to different ethnic groups, said Dr Lee Soo Chin, one of the clinicians involved in this study.

"With more research, we may find that different people need to be treated differently, as the various races seem to respond differently," said Dr Lee, Associate Director of Research at the National University Cancer Institute.

The study, which involved 2,500 patients from the National University Hospital and 2,700 patients from the University Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC), was conducted by researchers from the National University of Singapore Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health and the UMMC.

Conducted last year, the study found that the median age at diagnosis was 46 years for Malay patients, 51 years for the Chinese and 53 for the Indians.

The five-year overall survival rate was the lowest for Malay women at 58.5 per cent, with the next at 68 per cent for Indians and 75.8 per cent for the Chinese.

But researchers lodged a caveat that the study only measured death statistics of breast cancer patients who might have a host of other diseases - causes of death may not be directly linked to the cancer.