

## Expressions of Perceived Severity towards Nasopharyngeal Cancer

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**Abstract.** *Perceived severity of diseases influences health protective behaviour. Although the causes of cancer are not definitive, the public can seek regular cancer screening to detect cancer early to bring about better treatment outcomes. The study investigated perceived severity of nasopharyngeal cancer (NPC) among Malaysians, focusing on their expressions of disease seriousness. The participants were 65 Malaysians aged 13 to 65. They were interviewed about their perceived severity towards NPC before and after reading an NPC pamphlet produced by the Ministry of Health, Malaysia in Malay. A majority of the participants perceived NPC as a severe disease linked to death, scary symptoms, and disruption to the quality of life. The analysis revealed that before reading the pamphlet, the participants said that the word “cancer” made them fearful, and it is associated with images of sick and suffering patients, side-effects of chemotherapy which includes loss of appetite and weight, and the despondence of “waiting for death”. This is based on their general knowledge of NPC. After reading the pamphlet, the participants’ knowledge of NPC severity increased, indicated by the highlighting of NPC incidence (“the fourth most common cancer in Malaysia”) and symptoms such as “blurry vision”, “double vision”, “lumps on neck” and “bleeding”. The study suggests that perceived severity of this cancer is affected by the words used in health pamphlets, which indicates the importance of disease risk communication materials in creating public awareness on health protective behaviour.*

**Keywords:** *perceived, severity, expressions, nasopharyngeal, cancer*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nasopharyngeal cancer (NPC), also known as nose and throat cancer, is the fourth most common cancer in Malaysia (Ministry of Health, Malaysia. (2016). Some ethnic groups have a higher likelihood of contracting NPC. In Malaysia, the Chinese have a higher risk of getting NPC because NPC ranks third for Chinese males and ninth for Chinese females. In comparison, among the Malay, NPC ranks seventh for Malay male but it is not common among Malay females. NPC is also not common among the Indian. However, NPC incidence is high among Malaysians in the Others category which includes the Sabah and Sarawak indigenous. NPC ranks second for male indigenous and eighth for indigenous female. Devi et al. (2004) identified the Bidayuh group from Sarawak to be more susceptible to NPC than other indigenous groups.

There seems to be lack of awareness towards NPC symptoms because a majority of NPC patients had the cancer diagnosed at Stages 3 and 4 (63% for males, 60% for females) (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2017). Despite NPC incidence being high among Malaysians, ranking number four in cancer incidences, Ting et al. (in press) found that Malaysians view themselves to be at low risk to NPC and rated the