

News story: Cancer patients at increased risk of suicide

Cancer patients in England are at increased risk of suicide compared to the general population, according to new figures from Public Health England (PHE).

The first national study of its kind in England reveals cancer patients have a 20% increased risk of suicide, with the highest risk seen within the first 6 months of diagnosis.

The findings of the study, presented at PHE's Cancer Services, Data and Outcomes Conference, show cancers with poorer prognoses are associated with the highest risk, including:

- mesothelioma
- pancreatic cancer
- oesophageal cancer
- lung cancer
- stomach cancer

The reasons are complex and not fully understood, but may include fear of pain or treatment side-effects.

The study, in collaboration with University College London, looked at adults diagnosed with malignant cancer over a 20-year period from PHE's National Cancer Registration and Analysis Service (NCRAS), compared with mortality data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). It identified 2,491 cancer patients whose cause of death was recorded as suicide or an open verdict.

Advances in care and treatment mean more people with cancer are surviving and living longer; however, this study suggests many are struggling with their diagnosis.

This highlights the need for emotional support – including targeted psychological screening – to be integrated early into cancer care, alongside diagnosis and treatment. It is important for health professionals to consider the risk of suicide to help avoid potentially preventable deaths.

Dr Jem Rashbass, Cancer Lead at Public Health England said:

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can be devastating, which is why it's so important for every patient and their carers to get the support they need. This study shows how critical the first 6 months are to quality of life and reducing the risk of suicide.

Health professionals play a vital role in offering emotional support to cancer patients at this most difficult time. It is

important that they recognise the signs of depression, especially when their patients may often have many other physical needs.”

Andrew Kaye, Head of Policy at Macmillan Cancer Support, said:

Being told you have cancer is like being plunged into the unknown and can be an incredibly difficult and frightening time. That’s why it’s so important that people are given the right support to find their best way through from the moment they’re diagnosed.

Empowering people with cancer to have difficult conversations about how they are feeling and providing vital support are critical to avoiding potentially preventable deaths. Mental health should be taken just as seriously as physical health when looking at a patient’s holistic needs.