Cancer Death Rates Decreased Among Black People, but Still Remain High

Death rates declined in most cancer types, especially in lung and stomach cancer cases.

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Over the past 20 years, the rates of cancer deaths among Black people have steadily declined in the United States; however, they remain notably higher than those of other racial and ethnic groups, a new study from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) found.

A research team led by Wayne Lawrence, Dr.PH, of the Metabolic Epidemiology Branch in NCI's Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, used death certificates from the National Center for Health Statistics to observe cancer death rates by sex, age and cancer site in non-Hispanic Black people ages 20 and older. Researchers then compared 2019 cancer death rates among Black men and women with other racial and ethnic groups.

Between 1999 and 2019, more than 1 million deaths were attributed to cancer among Black men and women. During this time, death rates decreased by 2% per year, and men experienced a higher rate of decline (2.6% per year) than women (1.5% per year).

Death rates for most cancer types dropped, but deaths from lung cancer among men decreased most rapidly (3.8% per year); among women, stomach cancer showed the greatest decrease (3.4% per year). Despite this progress, liver cancer deaths increased among older Black men and women, and uterine cancer deaths increased among Black women.

Lawrence said the overall declines in cancer death rates in Black people could be attributed to advances in treatment, improved access to screening, earlier detection and behavioral changes. He also noted the disparity in deaths is likely due to systemic barriers to quality care. "Black individuals continue to have a delay in care or receive poorer care than their white counterparts," Lawrence said in a news release.

Researchers went on to say that Black people are at a higher risk of developing illness due to limited access to specialists or physicians with proper clinical resources as well as increased exposure to environmental carcinogens, such as air pollution.

To learn more about disparities in cancer treatment, click here.

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