

Cancer patients' partners become ill themselves

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Katarina Sjövall has studied partners of individuals with colorectal cancer, lung cancer, breast cancer or prostate cancer. The study shows that the number of diagnosed diseases among partners increased by 25 per cent after the cancer diagnosis.

"Having a close relative with [cancer](#) entails worry and anxiety and an increased workload that places a strain on one's health", she says.

The most significant increase was in diagnoses of mental illnesses such as depression. However, there was also a significant increase in cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal diseases and abdominal diseases. The highest increase was in cardiovascular disease among spouses and partners of those with [lung cancer](#), which increased by almost 50 per cent.

The increase in diagnosed diseases led to increased use of the health service, primarily in-patient care. Among the partners who worked, the number of days of sick leave also increased. The worst affected were spouses and partners of lung [cancer patients](#), who had over 70 per cent more days off sick than the general population in the year following their partner's diagnosis.

While women in general are responsible for a larger proportion of healthcare costs than men in Sweden, the reverse was true in this case. Healthcare costs increased most for men under 64 who had a partner with cancer.

"One possible explanation could be that the men feel less comfortable taking on a caring role as the partner of a cancer patient and that they therefore suffer more stress", says Katarina Sjövall.

In one of her studies, Ms Sjövall interviewed patients with colorectal cancer and their partners. The patients sometimes spoke of feeling that their physical and psychological experiences were not acknowledged by the health service. Neither did their partners always feel as involved as they would like to be.

"Our interviews showed that the cancer patients sometimes chose not to tell those closest to them what they were going through out of consideration for them. However, this considerate attitude could have the opposite effect", says Katarina Sjövall.

When it comes to the health service, Ms Sjövall finds that care at the end of life is good at also helping the relatives and making them feel involved in what is happening. At earlier stages, however, there may be wide variations in approach and opportunities to offer support to relatives.

Another part of the study looks at the cancer patients' sick leave in the year prior to the cancer diagnosis. Individuals with colon cancer and lung cancer had twice as many days off sick as the control group even in the year before their diagnosis.

"One reason could be that both forms of cancer have a lot to do with lifestyle. Therefore, individuals with colon cancer often also have diabetes, and individuals with lung cancer often have [cardiovascular disease](#). The sick leave may have been due to these other diseases – but it could also have been due to early symptoms of the cancer. This makes one wish there were better ways to make a diagnosis based on very early cancer symptoms", says Katarina Sjövall.

Provided by Lund University

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