

Study finds bankruptcy rates among cancer patients increase along with survival time

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An analysis linking federal bankruptcy court records to cancer registry data from nearly 232,000 adult cancer cases in western Washington during a 14-year period has found a hidden cost to survival: Insolvency rates increase along with the length of survival.

"Patients diagnosed with cancer may face significant financial stress due to income loss and out-of-pocket costs associated with their treatment," said Scott Ramsey, M.D., Ph.D., a health care economist and internist at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center who led the study. "On average, [bankruptcy](#) rates increased fourfold within five years of diagnosis." Ramsey presented the findings June 6 at the 2011 annual meeting of the [American Society of Clinical Oncology](#) in Chicago.

The study found that compared to the general population, bankruptcy rates were nearly twice as high among [cancer patients](#) one year after diagnosis, and that the median time to bankruptcy was two and a half years after diagnosis.

"The risk of bankruptcy for cancer patients is not well known, and previous studies have relied on individual self-reports about medically related reasons for bankruptcy filing," said Ramsey, a member of the Hutchinson Center's Public Health Sciences Division. "By linking two irrefutable government records of cancer and bankruptcy, we are able to determine how financial insolvency risk varies by cancer type, treatment and other factors," he said.

For the study, Ramsey and colleagues linked Washington state cancer registry data with federal bankruptcy court records in 13 western Washington counties. They measured the rate of bankruptcy after a first [cancer diagnosis](#) and identified factors that increased bankruptcy risk among people with common cancers.

They found that bankruptcy risk varies widely across cancer types. The risk is highest for lung, thyroid and leukemia/lymphoma cancer patients. In contrast, patients over 65, who are typically on Medicare, have a much lower risk of bankruptcy than younger patients. The researchers also found that bankruptcy rates among [cancer](#) patients have increased significantly since the U.S. financial crisis.

Ramsey and colleagues in the Hutchinson Center's Public Health Sciences Division, along with researchers at the University of Washington, conducted the study in collaboration with the U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Western District of Washington, Seattle.

Provided by Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center

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