

By age 45, smokers already at significantly higher risk of cancer death

September 13 2012, by Erin White

(Medical Xpress)—A new Northwestern Medicine study shows that smoking during your middle-aged years dramatically increases your lifetime risk of not just getting cancer, but dying from it.

Researchers found that [male smokers](#) have a greater risk of dying from cancer than female smokers, but smokers of both sexes are much more likely than non-smokers to die from the disease. Here are some of the results:

- Male smokers, aged 45, have a 75 percent increase in risk of dying from cancer in their lifetime than non-smokers of the same age and gender.
- [Female smokers](#), aged 45, have a 64 percent increase in risk of dying from cancer in their lifetime than non-smokers of the same age and gender.

"Age, gender and smoking status play a huge role in people's health," said Donald M. Lloyd-Jones, M.D. the senior author of the study. "This study should be another wake-up call for middle-aged smokers, most of whom have already been smoking for decades. They are at a much greater risk of dying from cancer than non-smokers their age."

Lloyd-Jones is the chair of [preventive medicine](#) at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a [cardiologist](#) at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

The study was published online in the journal *Cancer Causes and Control*. This is the first study to use data pooled from 10 well-known epidemiologic cohorts in the United States that included men and women, middle aged and older, to estimate the risk smokers have of dying from cancer in their lifetime versus nonsmokers. The study took into account and adjusted for other non-cancer, [deadly diseases](#) smokers and non-smokers face, such as cardiovascular disease.

"It may surprise some to know that [lung cancer](#) was not the only cancer that killed these smokers," said Andrew Gawron, M.D., a fellow in the department of medicine at Feinberg and first author of the study. "We found that those who smoked at age 45 greatly increased their risk of dying from a wide variety of cancers later on and often die from cancer at younger ages than non-smokers."

Researchers calculated smoker's and non-smoker's [lifetime risk](#) of dying from cancer not only at age 45, but ages 55, 65 and 75, too. As smokers aged, they were more likely to die from competing risks, such as [cardiovascular disease](#), rather than cancer, according to the study. However, the fact that non-smokers have a decreased risk of dying from cancer across all ages implies that any decrease in tobacco exposure could lead to decreases in cancer deaths and improved longevity, Gawron said.

"These are alarming numbers that doctors can provide to middle-aged smokers during clinical visits," Gawron said. "Hopefully it will encourage smoking cessation and help patients adopt a healthier lifestyle."

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: By age 45, smokers already at significantly higher risk of cancer death (2012,

September 13) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-09-age-smokers-significantly-higher-cancer.html>

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