

Deaths from oesophageal cancer up by almost 50 per cent in last 40 years

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The number of people dying from oesophageal cancer – cancer of the gullet or food pipe – has risen by 49 per cent in the last 40 years according to new figures published by *Cancer Research UK*, today.

The latest figures show around 7,600 people (13 in every 100,000) die each year from [oesophageal cancer](#), compared to around 3,800 in 1971 (eight in every 100,000). For men, death rates have jumped by 65 per cent since the 1970s. But the increase is much smaller for women, with rates rising by nine percent.

This dramatic rise is linked to the growing number of people developing the disease every year. Lifestyle factors such as obesity, smoking, and drinking alcohol can all increase the risk of oesophageal cancer. But an important risk factor is persistent heartburn, also known as acid reflux.

Oesophageal cancer is now the sixth most common cause of [cancer death](#) in the UK.

Mr Tim Underwood, an oesophageal surgeon and researcher for Cancer Research UK's ICGC project at the University of Southampton, said: "These figures are a clear reminder that we've still a long way to go with oesophageal cancer. We must do more to diagnose the disease as early as possible. As a surgeon, I see many patients walk through my door who have not recognised or ignored the symptoms that might be oesophageal cancer for too long, and they only seek help when food starts to get stuck when they swallow. So by the time I see them it's too late for treatment

that could cure them.

"People should be aware that persistent heartburn is not normal. If this is happening to you, you need to see your GP. The vast majority of people won't have anything seriously wrong with them, but it's important to get it checked out.

"And there's still so much more we need to learn about how the disease behaves – research is the answer to this. This is why I ran the New York Marathon in November to raise money for the International Cancer Genome Consortium (ICGC) project where researchers are working hard to unravel the genetic code of oesophageal cancer."

Oesophageal cancer is the fourth most common cause of cancer death in men, causing six per cent (around 5,100) of all male deaths from cancer. The lifetime risk of developing oesophageal cancer is 1 in 56 for men and 1 in 110 for women. But the good news is that over the past decade, deaths from oesophageal cancer seem to be stabilising.

Helena, 26, from Surrey, lost her father Clive to oesophageal cancer, just nine months after being diagnosed with the condition in 2002. Helena says: "Dad had been sick for about a year before the diagnosis was made but I never thought it would turn out to be cancer. I remember thinking, it won't be anything too serious because he's my Dad and cancer happens to other people not to my family.

"Research into this devastating disease is more important than ever so that other people going through this like we did don't have to lose their loved ones too soon."

Dr Harpal Kumar, Cancer Research UK's chief executive, said: "We need to do better for oesophageal cancer patients. At Cancer Research UK, research into oesophageal [cancer](#) is a priority for us, and we will

make sure that it continues to be so.

"Many of us will have had heartburn as we over indulged over the festive period. But if you need to take heartburn tablets on a regular basis – for more than three weeks for example – make sure you go and get this checked out with your doctor."

More information: Oesophageal cancer mortality statistics:
[www.cancerresearchuk.org/cance ... esophagus/mortality/](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/cance...esophagus/mortality/)

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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