

# Bereaved individuals may face higher risk of dying from melanoma

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Melanoma in skin biopsy with H&E stain—this case may represent superficial spreading melanoma. Credit: Wikipedia/CC BY-SA 3.0

Individuals who experience the loss of a partner are less likely to be diagnosed with melanoma but face an increased risk of dying from the disease, according to research published in the *British Journal of Dermatology*.

The researchers, led by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and Aarhus University Hospital, investigated whether bereaved individuals had a higher risk of being diagnosed with, or dying from, melanoma than the non-bereaved. They used data from two large population-based studies between 1997 and 2017 in the UK and Denmark.

They found that [melanoma patients](#) who experienced bereavement had a 17% higher risk of dying from their melanoma compared with those who were not bereaved, with similar results seen in both the UK and Denmark.

This study also showed that those who had lost a partner were 12% less likely to be diagnosed with melanoma compared with non-bereaved persons, with 620 and 1667 bereaved diagnosed in the UK and Denmark respectively over the 20 year period, compared with 6430 and 16,166 non-bereaved.

While previous studies have suggested a link between various types of stress and progression of melanoma, which may have played a role in the finding, the researchers suggest that an alternative explanation could be that bereaved people no longer have a close person to help notice skin changes.

This delays detection of a possible melanoma, and therefore diagnosis, until the cancer has progressed to later stages, when it is generally more aggressive and harder to treat.

Each year, 197,000 people are diagnosed with melanoma globally. Melanoma makes up around 5% of all cancer cases in the UK and Denmark. The survival rate of melanoma patients is relatively high, depending on what stage the cancer is at detection. Early detection and treatment are crucial for improving survival.

Angel Wong, lead author and Research Fellow at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said:

"Many factors can influence melanoma survival. Our work suggests that melanoma may take longer to detect in bereaved people, potentially because partners play an important role in spotting early signs of skin cancer.

"Support for recently bereaved people, including showing how to properly check their skin, could be vital for early detection of skin cancer, and thus improved survival."

The researchers also encourage [family members](#) or caregivers to perform skin examinations for the remaining partner, and call for clinicians to lower their threshold for undertaking skin examinations in bereaved people.

They acknowledge the study's limitations, including the lack of information on some risk factors of melanoma, such as sun exposure or family history, but consider that this had limited impact on the conclusions drawn from this study.

Dr. Walayat Hussain of the British Association of Dermatologists said:

"Detecting [melanoma](#) early can greatly improve survival and partners are key to this. Those without a partner should be vigilant in checking their skin, particularly in hard to reach locations such as the back, scalp, and ears.

"Skin [cancer](#) is a disease which is most common in older people, who are also most likely to be bereaved, so targeting [skin](#) checking advice at this group should be a priority."

**More information:** A. Wong, T. Frøslev, L. Dearing, H. Forbes, A. Mulick, K. Mansfield, R. Silverwood, A. Kjærsgaard, H. Sørensen, L. Smeeth, A. Lewin, S. Schmidt, S.M. Langan. The association between partner bereavement and melanoma: cohort studies in the UK and Denmark. *British Journal of Dermatology*, 2020.

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