

Study confirms pancreatic cancer rates rising faster in women than men

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Axial CT image with i.v. contrast. Macrocystic adenocarcinoma of the pancreatic head. Credit: public domain

In a large-scale nationwide study, investigators from Cedars-Sinai Cancer have confirmed that rates of pancreatic cancer are rising—and are rising faster among younger women, particularly Black women, than

among men of the same age. Their work was published today in the peer-reviewed journal *Gastroenterology*.

"We can tell that the rate of pancreatic [cancer](#) among women is rising rapidly, which calls attention to the need for further research in this area," said Srinivas Gaddam, MD, associate director of Pancreatic Biliary Research at Cedars-Sinai and senior author of the study. "There's a need to understand these trends, and to make changes today so this doesn't affect women disproportionately in the future."

The pancreas, located just behind the stomach, secretes enzymes and hormones that help the body digest food and process sugars. Pancreatic cancer has the highest mortality rate of all major cancers, accounting for 3% of all cancer deaths in the U.S. and is more common among men than women.

In this study, investigators combed data from the National Program of Cancer Registries (NCPR) database, which represents approximately 64.5% of the U.S. population, on patients diagnosed with pancreatic cancer between 2001 and 2018.

Investigators found that rates of pancreatic cancer increased among both women and men. Unexpectedly, rates among women under the age of 55 rose 2.4% higher than rates among men of the same age, while similar increased rates were observed among older men and women. Furthermore, rates among young Black women rose 2.23% higher than among young Black men.

"And while we're reporting improving survival in pancreatic cancer each year, that improvement is largely among men," Gaddam said. "The mortality rate among women is not improving."

One possible explanation put forward by the investigators pertains to the

type and location of tumors. Rates of pancreatic head adenocarcinoma, an especially aggressive and deadly type of tumor situated at the head of the pancreas, appear to be increasing, the investigators found.

While Gaddam said it is important for future studies to examine the cause of these trends, he stressed that at this point the increase is small and his findings shouldn't be cause for alarm.

"The data shows us a small increase in risk of pancreatic cancer," he said. "And that [awareness](#) might refocus people on the need to stop smoking, reduce alcohol use, eat a [healthy diet](#), exercise regularly and manage their weight. These lifestyle changes all help decrease the risk of pancreatic cancer."

People with chronic abdominal pain are often concerned that they have pancreatic cancer, but Gaddam said that is usually a sign of another condition. However, people experiencing unexplained weight loss or jaundice—a yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes—should seek [medical attention](#) as these are potential signs of [pancreatic cancer](#) or another serious medical issues.

Looking ahead, Gaddam's research will focus on determining the causes of these trends, including examining potential differences between pancreatic tumors in women and in men.

"This continuing work will help us to evaluate the effectiveness of new healthcare interventions, with the goal of identifying and addressing disparities in patient outcomes and access to [effective treatment](#)," said Dan Theodorescu, MD, Ph.D., director of Cedars-Sinai Cancer and the PHASE ONE Distinguished Chair. "This is an ongoing focus throughout Cedars-Sinai Cancer as we serve our diverse population and can also inform public health policies to benefit patients everywhere."

More information: Yazan Abboud et al, Increasing Pancreatic Cancer Incidence in Young Women in the US: A Population-Based Time-Trend Analysis, 2001-2018, *Gastroenterology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1053/j.gastro.2023.01.022](https://doi.org/10.1053/j.gastro.2023.01.022)

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