

# Severe mental illness linked to low attendance at cancer screening

May 3 2023

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People with severe mental illness are less likely to attend cancer screening compared to those who do not have such conditions, according to new research from the University of Surrey and the Office for Health

Improvement and Disparities (OHID) at the Department of Health and Social Care.

The study found disparity in attendance at [cancer screening](#) in people with severe mental illness, with the most pronounced disparities being observed for those diagnosed with schizophrenia, followed by those diagnosed with other psychoses and bipolar disorder.

The researchers suggested that the lower attendance at screening, seen in these populations, may be a contributing factor as to why people with [severe conditions](#) are more likely to die prematurely from cancer.

The analysis, which included data from the Clinical Practice Research Datalink (CPRD) on over one million people, also showed that:

- Inequalities were widest for bowel cancer screening (42 percent of people with a severe mental illness attended bowel cancer screening, compared to 59 percent of people without), followed by breast (48 percent vs. 60 percent) and cervical screening (64 percent vs. 70 percent).
- Attendance among those with severe mental illness was particularly low for those living in more deprived parts of the country, where the prevalence of severe mental illness is also higher.

Dr. Robert Kerrison, lead author of the study and co-lead of the Cancer Care group at the University of Surrey, said, "People with severe mental illness are two and a half times more likely to die prematurely from cancer than their peers. Their cancer is often diagnosed at an [advanced stage](#), which limits the treatment options available to them. Increasing [early diagnosis](#), through screening, could help save lives from cancer, and reduce inequalities in cancer outcomes.

"We now need to learn more about why participation rates are lower for these individuals, so that [medical professionals](#) can tailor support and make it easier for people with severe mental conditions to attend."

Researchers also found further inequalities in the data. Among adults with severe mental illness, people from some ethnic minority backgrounds were less likely to attend cancer screening appointments. The data showed that participation in bowel cancer screening was lower among Black adults with severe mental illness, compared with White adults (35 percent vs. 44 percent), and that the same was true for Black adults without severe mental illness, compared to White adults (48 percent vs. 62 percent).

Cancer Research UK's executive director of policy and information, Dr. Ian Walker, said, "This research not only exposes concerning barriers to participating in cancer screening faced by people with [severe mental illness](#), it also crucially shows where these disparities persist across ethnic minority groups and in more [deprived areas](#)."

"We need to delve further into this area of research to properly understand why these gaps exist. It's vital that we work with individuals and communities to build targeted interventions that ensure everyone benefits equally from programs that diagnose cancer early and, ultimately, save lives."

This research was published in *British Journal of Cancer*.

**More information:** Inequalities in cancer screening participation between adults with and without severe mental illness: results from a cross-sectional analysis of primary care data on English Screening Programmes, *British Journal of Cancer* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41416-023-02249-3](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41416-023-02249-3)

Provided by University of Surrey

Citation: Severe mental illness linked to low attendance at cancer screening (2023, May 3)  
retrieved 24 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-severe-mental-illness-linked-cancer.html>

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