Adults with learning disabilities three times more likely to die from cancer, researchers find

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Researchers at the University of Glasgow have found that adults with learning disabilities are more likely to die from cancer compared to the
general population.

The new study, led by the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory and published in the *BMJ Open*, found that adults with learning disabilities had a higher incidence of metastatic cancer of unknown primary origin (cancer that has spread to other parts of the body), and three times as many died from cancer at this advanced stage compared to the general population.

The most common cancer-related deaths were similar for women with and without learning disabilities, including breast, digestive (specifically colorectal) and respiratory cancers. However, women with learning disabilities had higher mortality rates from breast cancer, female genital organ cancers (namely ovarian cancer and body of uterus) and, cancers of unknown primary origin.

The most common cancer-related deaths in men with learning disabilities mirrored the general population, including digestive (specifically colorectal), and respiratory cancers. However, men with learning disabilities were more likely to die from colorectal cancer and cancers of unknown primary origin.

Lead researcher Dr. Laura Ward, said, "These findings are deeply concerning. Adults with learning disabilities are missing out on lifesaving cancer treatment due to their cancer being found too late and we urgently need to find out why this is case."

People with learning disabilities continue to face significant health inequalities, including a 20-year mortality gap and a higher proportion of avoidable deaths compared with the general population. Many cancers are considered either preventable or treatable. However, until now there has been a lack of robust comparable evidence looking at differences in cancer incidence and cancer deaths between the population with and
without learning disabilities.

The evidence highlights a clear need to promote awareness of cancer symptoms among adults with learning disabilities, their families and caregivers, especially for early detection and engagement with cancer screening programs.

Susan Moug, Consultant Colorectal Surgeon and Honorary Professor at the University of Glasgow, said, "It's so important that people with learning disabilities, their families and caregivers are supported to be aware of the signs and symptoms of cancer. Public health initiatives must consider the unique needs of people with learning disabilities, making screening more accessible and supporting earlier help-seeking for potential cancer symptoms."

Professor Deborah Cairns, Director of the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory and Cancer Programme Lead, said, "This is the first study in more than 20 years to report on the differences in cancer incidence and mortality between adults with learning disabilities and the general population.

"These startling findings highlight that people with learning disabilities continue to face significant health inequalities in all aspects of their lives including a higher proportion of avoidable cancer deaths. Many cancers are preventable and/or treatable and the more we raise awareness about early signs and symptoms, the more lives we are likely to save."

Provided by University of Glasgow

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