# Cancer death rates in the UK plunge by over 20% despite rising diagnoses



A new analysis reveals a profound shift in cancer mortality in the UK, with death rates falling by over 20% since the early 1970s, according to a report by Cancer Research UK. Despite the encouraging decline in fatalities—from 328 to approximately 252 deaths per 100,000 people between 1973 and 2023—diagnoses have soared by nearly 47%, highlighting a complex landscape in cancer care and outcomes.

The decline in cancer death rates is attributed to several factors, including advancements in medical technology, improved treatment options, and successful campaigns aimed at reducing smoking rates. Michelle Mitchell, chief executive of Cancer Research UK, acknowledged the progress made but expressed the need for continued improvements, particularly concerning the alarming rise in cancer diagnoses. The report emphasised that "survival for all cancers combined in England and Wales has doubled since the early 1970s," though it noted that enhancements in survival rates have decelerated since 2010, lagging behind progress seen in previous decades.

Researchers identified smoking as the foremost preventable cause of cancer, alongside rising concerns about obesity, which is associated with 13 types of the disease. Moreover, other lifestyle factors including sun exposure without protection, alcohol consumption, inactivity, and diets rich in processed meat are acknowledged as significant contributors to cancer risk.

Significantly, the report highlighted that about half of new cancer diagnoses occur in individuals aged 70 and over. However, younger demographics—particularly those aged 20 to 49—are experiencing a steep rise in cancer rates, with an increase of 23% noted since the early 1990s. This contradictory trend underscores the evolving nature of cancer and the imperative for updated public health strategies.

Surprisingly, the report indicates that just over half of cancers are diagnosed at an early stage, a proportion that has remained stagnant for nearly a decade. In light of this, Mitchell stated, “It’s fantastic to see that thanks to research, cancer death rates have drastically reduced… However, there’s more that can be done.” The urgency for systemic changes is underscored by statistics indicating that approximately 460 individuals die from cancer each day in the UK, with many cases diagnosed in advanced stages.

The growing call for action includes the demand from Cancer Research UK for the government to implement a National Cancer Plan for England that focuses on enhancing cancer services and improving survival rates. Among the proposed initiatives is a national lung cancer screening programme coupled with expedited access to diagnostic tests and improved primary care access to enable quicker diagnoses.

Additionally, a recent report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Less Survivable Cancers addresses the need to speed up diagnoses for less survivable cancers such as those affecting the brain, pancreas, and liver, which account for approximately 42% of all cancer deaths in the UK. Paulette Hamilton, chairwoman of the group, highlighted the significance of this moment for patient outcomes, citing imminent breakthroughs in research and potential government health reforms as catalysts for change.

Professor Peter Johnson, NHS national clinical director for cancer, noted that the NHS is managing increasing patient numbers, with record levels of early-stage diagnoses and improved survival rates. He pointed to innovative initiatives such as AI-driven detection systems and community-based lung cancer screening programmes as steps towards enhancing access to care.

As the UK grapples with these shifting statistics, the need for concerted efforts from both health authorities and the community remains critically important in the ongoing battle against cancer.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/cancer-death-rate-figures-research-uk-diagnosis-b2762568.html), [[6]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/10/nhs-diagnoses-thousands-more-cancers-as-cases-rise-by-5/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/cancer-death-rate-figures-research-uk-diagnosis-b2762568.html), [[3]](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/cancer-news/news-report/2025-02-21-cancer-death-rates-almost-60-higher-in-uks-most-deprived-areas), [[4]](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/research/cancer-statistics-fact-sheet)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/incidence/all-cancers-combined), [[5]](https://www.wcrf.org/preventing-cancer/cancer-statistics/uk-cancer-statistics/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/cancer-death-rate-figures-research-uk-diagnosis-b2762568.html), [[6]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/10/nhs-diagnoses-thousands-more-cancers-as-cases-rise-by-5/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/cancer-death-rate-figures-research-uk-diagnosis-b2762568.html), [[2]](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/incidence/all-cancers-combined)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/cancer-death-rate-figures-research-uk-diagnosis-b2762568.html), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/mortality-profile-march-2023/mortality-profile-commentary-march-2023)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/10/nhs-diagnoses-thousands-more-cancers-as-cases-rise-by-5/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[3]](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/cancer-news/news-report/2025-02-21-cancer-death-rates-almost-60-higher-in-uks-most-deprived-areas), [[4]](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/research/cancer-statistics-fact-sheet)
* Paragraph 9 – [[6]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/10/nhs-diagnoses-thousands-more-cancers-as-cases-rise-by-5/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/cancer-death-rate-figures-research-uk-diagnosis-b2762568.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/incidence/all-cancers-combined> - Cancer Research UK provides detailed statistics on cancer incidence rates in the UK. The data indicates that the number of new cancer cases is projected to rise from approximately 420,000 cases annually between 2023 and 2025 to around 506,000 cases annually between 2038 and 2040. This represents a 2% increase in age-standardised incidence rates, reaching 625 cases per 100,000 people by 2038-2040. The projections show a similar increase for both males and females, with rates rising by 1% for females and 3% for males over the same period.
3. <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/cancer-news/news-report/2025-02-21-cancer-death-rates-almost-60-higher-in-uks-most-deprived-areas> - A report by Cancer Research UK highlights significant disparities in cancer death rates across the UK. The study reveals that individuals living in the most deprived areas have cancer death rates nearly 60% higher than those in the least deprived areas. This equates to approximately 28,400 cancer deaths each year linked to socioeconomic inequality, accounting for more than 3 in 20 of all cancer deaths. The report underscores the need for targeted interventions to address these health inequalities.
4. <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/research/cancer-statistics-fact-sheet> - Macmillan Cancer Support offers comprehensive cancer statistics for the UK. The fact sheet reports that each year, around 167,000 people die from cancer in the UK, averaging 460 deaths daily. Between 2009 and 2019, age-standardised rates of cancer mortality per 100,000 people decreased by more than 8% across UK nations. However, the statistics also highlight that mortality has increased at a much slower rate compared to incidence, showing a rise of 7% between 2009 and 2019.
5. <https://www.wcrf.org/preventing-cancer/cancer-statistics/uk-cancer-statistics/> - The World Cancer Research Fund provides the latest cancer statistics for the UK, including incidence, mortality, survival rates, and preventability. In 2021, there were 395,181 new cancer cases in the UK, with 200,870 in men and 194,311 in women. This represents an increase of just under 7,400 cases (around 2%) compared to 2019. The most common cancers include breast, prostate, bowel, and lung cancers. The data also highlights that 1 in 2 people in the UK will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime.
6. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/10/nhs-diagnoses-thousands-more-cancers-as-cases-rise-by-5/> - NHS England reports a 5% increase in cancer diagnoses, with thousands more cases identified. In 2022, 180,877 men and 165,340 women were diagnosed with cancer. The most commonly diagnosed cancers were prostate and breast cancer, followed by lung and bowel cancers. The rise in diagnoses is partly attributed to NHS efforts to encourage individuals to seek checks, aiming to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cancer detection and treatment.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/mortality-profile-march-2023/mortality-profile-commentary-march-2023> - The UK Government's Mortality Profile Commentary for March 2023 provides updated mortality statistics, including cancer-related deaths. The report introduces new indicators, such as mortality rates for deaths due to COVID-19, heart disease, stroke, and various cancers. It updates existing indicators with 2021 data, offering insights into mortality trends and health outcomes across the UK. The report serves as a resource for understanding mortality patterns and informing public health strategies.