

B.C. cancer toll estimated at 9,000 this year

The good news is that patients in this province have the country's lowest mortality rates

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Cancer diagnoses and deaths will continue climbing in B.C. throughout 2007, but B.C. patients have the lowest mortality rates in Canada and the second lowest overall incidence rates.

The annual cancer statistics report released Tuesday by the Canadian Cancer Society shows there will be an estimated 20,600 new cases of cancer in B.C., 600 more than last year.

The projection is for 9,000 deaths, 200 more than last year. The increased number of new cases is attributed to population increases and aging.

Lung cancer will again be the leading cause of cancer death in men and women, killing 2,300 B.C. residents, while 2,800 will be newly diagnosed with the disease.

Breast cancer deaths are expected to increase slightly in 2007 to 640, while 2,700 women are expected to be diagnosed with it.

In men, about 3,200 will be diagnosed with prostate cancer and there will be an estimated 550 deaths from it.

Cathy Adair, vice-president of strategic initiatives for the Canadian Cancer Society, B.C. and Yukon Division, said B.C.'s relatively favourable status in cancer incidence and mortality has to do with factors associated with cancer risk reduction.

"People in B.C. have the healthiest lifestyles in Canada in terms of [less] smoking, active living and maintaining a healthy body weight. We have often been described as the California of Canada with regard to our health consciousness. But we also have better than average survival rates for a number of major cancers, and we believe that the coordinated system of cancer care through the B.C. Cancer Agency is an important reason for this."

The latest statistical report focuses on breast cancer and shows the death rate in Canadian women has dropped 25 per cent since 1986, when breast screening programs began.

"A 25-per-cent reduction is really quite startling," said Heather Logan, director of cancer control policy at the cancer society.

As well, women are surviving longer: The five-year survival rate is now 86 per cent, meaning that of all the women diagnosed with breast cancer today, 86 out of every 100 will be alive in five years.

Logan traced falling death rates to more and better breast screening, wider use of post-surgery drugs such as tamoxifen and Herceptin and more tolerable chemotherapy regimens.

But Dr. Paula Gordon, a clinical professor at the University of B.C. and senior radiologist in the breast health program at BC Women's Hospital, attributes the reduction in breast cancer death rates mainly to better screening.

"Once a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, she's given the same therapy, whether she found the lump or whether it was picked up on screening," she said. "Obviously, the therapy is getting better, but the earlier you find the cancer, the better the therapy has to work."

Mammography can pick up tumours as small as two millimetres, or the size of an orange seed.

"This says that screening works, that women should have screening and we're not getting that message across," said Gordon.

A recent report from B.C. found a 40-per-cent reduction in mortality in screened women compared to non-screened women. But across Canada, as few as 34 per cent of eligible women -- those aged 50 to 69 -- had a mammogram in the last two years as recommended.

Screening will find "abnormalities," the vast majority of which are not cancer, Gordon says.

"Women have to go into the screen knowing there's a good possibility they'll get called back, we might have to do an ultrasound or more mammogram pictures before we're sure. But better that they should go through that process than not attend screening at all."

Overall, the list of cancers that are decreasing at more than two per cent per year is long and includes testicular cancer, Hodgkin's lymphoma, stomach, larynx, prostate and lung cancer in men, and cancers of the cervix and stomach in women.

But the total number of new cancer cases and deaths continues to climb as the population ages and grows. The report estimates that across Canada, there will be 159,900 new cases of cancer, and 72,700 deaths this year.

About one out of every four Canadians will die from cancer.

Death rates for most cancers have stabilized or fallen since 1994, with the exception of lung cancer in women and liver cancer in men, according to the report.

For men, cancer death rates are falling largely because fewer are dying from three of the most common malignancies in males -- lung, prostate and colorectal cancer. But the rates aren't dropping as dramatically for women.

"We still have persistent and stubbornly high lung cancer incidence and death rates in women, largely tied to tobacco," Logan said.

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