

# Research funding slump alarms head of US cancer institutes

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The head of the US National Cancer Institute warned Tuesday that the United States could lose its global leadership in research into the disease because of lower spending.

"If you count inflation, our buying power is down by 20%. We are back at the level, in terms of buying power, at the level of 2001," NCI director Harold Varmus told a press conference, referring to expenditure at his institute.

The NCI, part of the National Institutes of Health/NIH, has an annual budget of \$5.5 billion.

That is about a sixth of the overall NIH budget of \$31 billion and not rising, amid tight budgetary constraints. The NIH is the largest public research institution in the world.

"With the rapid growth of the size of the biomedical community and with the increased expense of how science works, the consequences of advances of technologies, the success rate for grant applicants has fallen to an all-time low, to about 14% of NCI and 17% of NIH from mid 30% during the many years of fiscal growth," stressed Varmus, co-recipient of a [Nobel Prize](#) for studies of the genetic basis of cancer.

"That is an ironic comment at a time when scientific opportunities in all fields, not only cancer, are remarkably high in part because many prior investments allowed us to understand the [biological system](#) as a result of

the [human genome project](#)," he said.

That means the United States' preeminence in the field could be lost to European or Asian nations, he said.

So "because of these [discrepancies](#) between the promise of science and the ability to fund it, the biomedical ecosystem is under an unusual stress. There is more investment elsewhere in other countries, with more stable investment for research and we are running the risk of losing leadership to Europe and part of Asia," the NCI chief warned.

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