

# Suicide risk increases significantly following a cancer diagnosis

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New research indicates that the risk of suicide increases significantly in the first year following a diagnosis of cancer, and this increase varies by the type of cancer diagnosed. Published early online in *Cancer*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Cancer Society, the findings point to the importance of screening for suicide risk in newly diagnosed patients and ensuring that patients have access to social and emotional support.

Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the U.S., and suicidal death incidence is higher among cancer patients than in the general population. To estimate the risk of suicide within the year after a cancer diagnosis, a team led by co-senior authors Hesham Hamoda, MD, MPH, of Boston Children's Hospital/Harvard Medical School, and Ahmad Alfaar, MBBCh, MSc, of Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin, examined information on all [cancer patients](#) in the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) database between 2000 and 2014. This corresponded to about 28 percent of the U.S. population of patients with cancer.

"This is the largest study to assess recent trends in suicide risk after a [cancer diagnosis](#) in the US population," said lead author Anas Saad, MBBCh candidate, of Ain Shams University, in Cairo, Egypt.

Among the 4,671,989 patients in the analysis, 1,585 committed suicide within one year of their diagnosis. There was a two and a half times [higher risk](#) than what would be expected in the general population.

"Awareness among providers to screen for [suicide risk](#) and refer to [mental health services](#) is important for mitigating such risk and saving lives, especially within the first six months after diagnosis," said Dr. Alfaar. "Moreover, [family members](#) and caregivers must be trained to provide psychological support for their ill relatives."

When studied according to cancer site, the highest increase in risk was seen following pancreatic cancer and lung cancer. The risk of suicide also increased significantly following a diagnosis of colorectal cancer, but the risk of suicidal death did not increase significantly following breast and prostate cancer diagnoses.

"Both cancer and suicide are leading causes of death and present a major public health challenge. Our study highlights the fact that for some patients with cancer, their mortality will not be a direct result of the cancer itself, but rather because of the stress of dealing with it, culminating in suicide," said Dr. Hamoda. "This finding challenges us all to ensure that psychosocial support services are integrated early in cancer care."

**More information:** "Suicidal death within a year of cancer diagnosis; a population-based study." Anas M. Saad, Mohamed M. Gad, Muneer J. Al-Husseini, Mohamad A. AlKhayat, Ahmad Rachid, Ahmad Samir Alfaar, and Hesham M. Hamoda. *Cancer*; Published Online: January 7, 2019, [DOI: 10.1002/cncr.31876](https://doi.org/10.1002/cncr.31876)

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