

Medical bill worries tied to worse outcomes for cancer patients

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(HealthDay)—Financial worries can hamper the success of cancer treatment and raise patients' risk of death, according to a new study that offers the first evidence of such a link.

"The association we found was very strong, and very concerning," said senior study author Dr. Anurag Singh, director of radiation research at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center in Buffalo, N.Y. "If you are worried about your finances, your risk of dying is roughly double."

Singh's team surveyed 284 patients with head and neck cancer about their quality of life before and after treatment. Then they compared their responses to their outcomes.

"Head and [neck cancer](#) patients have the highest level of financial burden among any [cancer patients](#) because these are cancers where you can need surgery as well as extended courses of chemotherapy and radiation, along with substantial supportive care and rehabilitation," Singh said.

Many patients aren't well enough to work, which creates added stress, he noted.

"And we now know that this financial toxicity affects not just their mental and emotional well-being but their physical health, how they respond to [cancer treatment](#)," Singh said in a Roswell Park news release.

The 14.4% of patients who reported the greatest financial worries at the start of treatment were those most likely to have worse overall survival and worse cancer-specific survival, according to findings that will be published in the April issue of *Oral Oncology*.

"Financial toxicity could be a major unknown factor that could be affecting the results of even major clinical trials," Singh said.

He said researchers want everyone to be aware of these impacts.

"Doctors should consider how financial toxicity may be impacting their patients and do everything we can to improve our patients' quality of life, and we want to encourage patients to take advantage of financial counseling and every other resource that can lessen their burden," Singh added.

Previous research by study co-author Elizabeth Repasky, interim chairwoman of immunology at Roswell Park, found that chronic stress can limit the effectiveness of [cancer](#) treatment.

"These studies reveal the importance of stressful factors that are often hidden and beyond the control of the patient or caregiver in treatment outcome," she said.

More information: The U.S. National Cancer Institute has more on [financial struggles and cancer treatment](#).

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