# **UK cancer study shows big fall in death rates since early 1990s**

Improved screening and treatment means fewer middle-aged people dying of disease despite rise in cases

More middle-aged people are getting cancer but fewer of them are dying from it thanks to improved detection and better treatment, research has found.

The findings are “positive and reassuring” for those aged 35 to 69, according to cancer experts quoted in the British Medical Journal, which published the paper.

Cases of cancer in that age group rose between 1993 and 2018, according to [Cancer](https://www.theguardian.com/society/cancer) Research UK (CRUK), which played a leading role in the study. However, the number of men and women dying from the disease fell by 37% and 33% respectively over the same 25 years.

The overall death rate from cancer among middle-aged people fell across that period – and for 17 out of the 23 common types studied, in some cases spectacularly, according to the research, which was the first British study to examine trends in incidence and mortality of the disease over such a long period.

For example, the [death rate](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cervical-cancer) among women from cervical cancer fell by 54.3%. CRUK said that was because the widespread take-up of the [HPV jab](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/hpv-human-papillomavirus-vaccine/) and improved screening had combined to help “to prevent cancer and stop the disease in its tracks”.

Similarly, the mortality rate for lung cancer, the UK’s biggest cancer killer, decreased by 53.2% in men and 20.7% in women, thanks to fewer people smoking. The death rate has also fallen for breast and bowel cancer, probably because screening for them has meant more cases were picked up at an earlier stage, enabling faster treatment.

CRUK collaborated on the research with experts from the University of Leeds and University College London, as well as Public [Health](https://www.theguardian.com/society/health) Scotland. They analysed UK cancer registration figures and population data going back to 1993 to identify changes over time.

In the paper, published in the BMJ, they said: “Cancer mortality had a substantial reduction during the last 25 years in both men and women aged 35-69 years.

“This decline is likely a reflection of the successes in cancer prevention. For example smoking, prevention policies and cessation programmes; earlier detection, for example screening programmes; and improved diagnostic tests.”

The biggest falls in cancer mortality rate were for stomach, [mesothelioma](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/mesothelioma/), which is associated with exposure to asbestos, and bladder among men, and stomach, cervical and non-Hodgkin lymphoma among women.

However, it was not all good news. The experts also found the number of cancer diagnoses in middle-aged people rose by 57% among men and by 48% among women. That was mainly because of increases in prostate and breast cancer, the most common male and female cancers.

There have been what expert say are worrying annual increases of at least 2% for four types of the disease, namely liver, melanoma, oral and kidney cancer.

CRUK blamed the rise in cases among 35- to 69-year-olds on the growing population and “lifestyle factors”, especially obesity, alcohol consumption and exposure to the sun.

Michelle Mitchell, the charity’s chief executive, said the big fall in cancer death rates showed that concerted action against the disease did save lives. She urged Rishi Sunak to build on that legacy by pressing ahead with his plan to raise the age at which people can buy tobacco by one year every year and by investing more in stop smoking services.

Steve Russell, the director of vaccination and screening at [NHS](https://www.theguardian.com/society/nhs) England, said: “It is great to see this report bear witness to the significant improvements we have seen in cancer survival.

“The NHS is determined to build on these improvements, so we are working hard to achieve our ambitions of seeing 55,000 more people each year surviving their cancer for five years or longer by 2028 and three-quarters of people with cancer being diagnosed at an early stage by 2028.”

Being overweight and obese is a recognised cause of 13 forms of the disease, including liver and kidney cancer. Dr Helen Croker, the assistant director of policy and research at the World Cancer Research Fund, urged ministers to implement policies to reduce the Britain’s high levels of obesity.