What Percentage of People Survive Cancer?

The 5-year relative survival rate for all cancers diagnosed between 1999 and 2006 is 68%, up from 50% in 1975-1977 (see page 18). The improvement in survival reflects progress in diagnosing certain cancers at an earlier stage and improvements in treatment. Survival statistics vary greatly by cancer type and stage at diagnosis. Relative survival compares survival among cancer patients to that of people not diagnosed with cancer who are of the same age, race, and sex. It represents the percentage of cancer patients who are alive after some designated time period (usually 5 years) relative to persons without cancer. It does not distinguish between patients who have been cured and those who have relapsed or are still in treatment. While 5-year relative survival is useful in monitoring progress in the early detection and treatment of cancer, it does not represent the proportion of people who are cured permanently, since cancer deaths can occur beyond 5 years after diagnosis.

Although relative survival for specific cancer types provides some indication about the average survival experience of cancer patients in a given population, it may or may not predict individual prognosis and should be interpreted with caution. First, 5-year relative survival rates for the most recent time period are based on patients who were diagnosed from 1999 to 2006 and do not reflect recent advances in detection and treatment. Second, factors that influence survival, such as treatment protocols, additional illnesses, and biological or behavioral differences of each individual, cannot be taken into account in the estimation of relative survival rates. For more information about survival rates, see Sources of Statistics on page 53.

How Is Cancer Staged?

Staging describes the extent or spread of the disease at the time of diagnosis. Proper staging is essential in determining the choice of therapy and in assessing prognosis. A cancer’s stage is

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**Age-adjusted Cancer Death Rates,* Males by Site, US, 1930-2007**

*Per 100,000, age adjusted to the 2000 US standard population.

**Note:** Due to changes in ICD coding, numerator information has changed over time. Rates for cancer of the liver, lung and bronchus, and colon and rectum are affected by these changes.


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