What Percentage of People Survive Cancer?

The 5-year relative survival rate for all cancers diagnosed between 2002 and 2008 is 68%, up from 49% in 1975-1977 (see page 18). The improvement in survival reflects both 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 2002 to 2008 and thus, do not reflect the most recent advances in detection and treatment. Second, factors that influence survival, such as treatment protocols, other illnesses, and biological and behavioral differences of individual cancers or people, cannot be taken into account in the estimation of relative survival rates. For more information about survival rates, see Sources of Statistics on page 58.

How Is Cancer Staged?

Staging describes the extent or spread of cancer at the time of diagnosis. Proper staging is essential in determining the choice of therapy and in assessing prognosis. A cancer’s stage is based on the size or extent of the primary (main) tumor and whether it has spread to other areas of the body. A number of different staging systems are used to classify tumors. A system of summary staging (in situ, local, regional, and distant) is used for descriptive and statistical analysis of tumor registry data. If cancer cells are present only in the layer of cells where they developed and have not spread, the stage is in situ. If cancer cells have penetrated beyond the original layer of tissue, the cancer is invasive and categorized as local, regional, or distant stage based on the...