

# Decline in cancer deaths in Singapore despite increase in new cases

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The number of new cancer cases here has been rising in recent years, but that of deaths due to cancer here has fallen.

The cancer death rate has fallen by 21 per cent since 2012, according to data from the Singapore Cancer Registry Annual Report 2023, published in January 2026 by the National Registry of Diseases Office.

There were 72 cancer deaths for every 100,000 people for the period between 2019 and 2023, down from 91 between 2008 and 2012, while the five-year survival rate rose from 53 per cent to 61 per cent.

This is despite an increase of about 10 per cent in the number of people being diagnosed with cancer between the two periods – 244 new cancer diagnoses per 100,000 people between 2019 and 2023, up from 222 in the five years before.

Between 2019 and 2023, the most commonly diagnosed cancer in males was prostate cancer, affecting 8,114, followed by colorectal and lung cancers. For women, it was breast cancer, followed by colorectal and lung cancers.

Lung, colorectal and liver cancers were responsible for most cancer deaths in males, while breast, colorectal and lung cancers accounted for the most cancer deaths among women and girls.

National Cancer Centre Singapore medical oncology division deputy chairman Tham Chee Kian attributed the decline in deaths to medical advances in cancer detection, diagnosis and treatment.

These include improved screen-

ing programmes and diagnostic technologies allowing for cancers to be detected at earlier, more treatable stages, he said.

The decrease is reflective of global trends in developed countries, noted Clinical Associate Professor Tham.

Data from the American Cancer Society showed that over the past three decades, cancer deaths had decreased by 34 per cent in the United States.

“Mortality rates are likely to continue declining in the future with advancements in early cancer detection and cancer therapeutics,” he said.

Dr Gloria Chan, a consultant with the haematology-oncology department at the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore, noted that modern chemotherapy, targeted therapy and immunotherapy have improved disease control even in late-stage cancers.

“Precision medicine and molecular profiling allow us to select treatments more accurately and avoid ineffective ones,” she said.

Cancer patients now also enjoy safer surgical techniques, more precise radiotherapy and much better supportive care, Dr Chan added.

“Today, we manage complica-

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The total-body PET/CT system at National University Hospital helps doctors to better detect cancer. An expert attributed the drop in cancer deaths here to medical advances in cancer detection, diagnosis and treatment. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

# Rise in cases among younger people

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tions such as infections, malnutrition, pain and treatment side effects far more effectively, which reduces treatment-related deaths and allows patients to stay on effective therapy longer,” she said.

Prof Tham said: “As Singapore’s population ages and people live longer lives, we are seeing higher numbers of cancer cases as cancer risk increases with age.”

He cautioned that this does not suggest that younger people should not be concerned about cancer.

The Straits Times reported on

Jan 26 that cancer diagnoses among those under 40 increased by 34 per cent for the period between 2019 and 2023, from the figure between 2003 and 2007.

“Young adults should not ignore unusual or worrying symptoms, such as unexplained weight loss, persistent fatigue, lumps or swelling or pain that does not go away, and get them checked by a doctor immediately,” Prof Tham said.

There is now a growing global effort to better understand the causes of why more young people are impacted by cancer, said Dr Chan.

“At the same time, we must prepare for the long-term survivor-

ship needs of younger patients, including fertility, career disruption, mental health and financial impact,” she added.

The outlook for the continued decline in cancer deaths is “cautiously optimistic”, Dr Chan said, noting the rapid advancements in cancer research and treatment.

“Public health measures will remain just as important. The benefits of reduced smoking prevalence and vaccinations such as HPV (human papillomavirus) and hepatitis B may take years to fully manifest, but they will have a substantial long-term impact,” she said.

“The key challenges ahead include tackling obesity, reducing harmful environmental exposures, and addressing cost and access barriers so that effective cancer treatments reach all who need them.”

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## Cancer deaths down

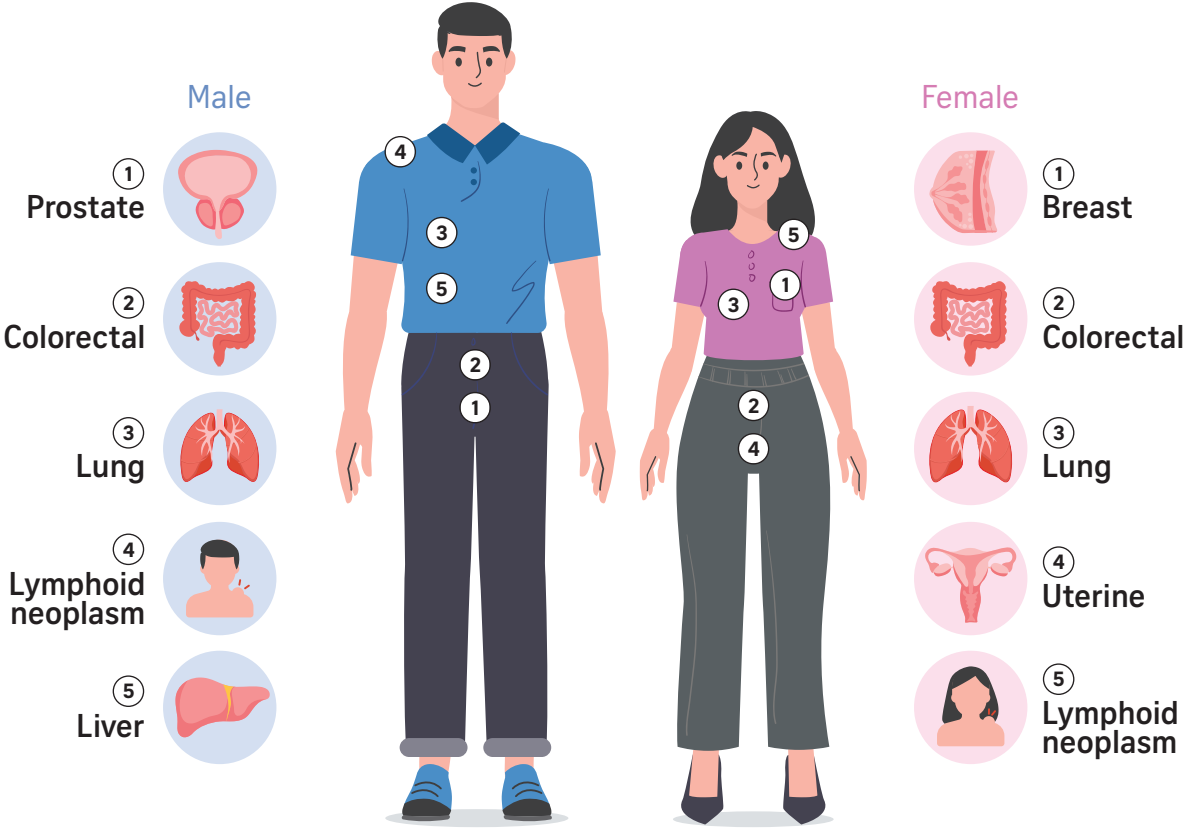
The cancer death rate has fallen by 21 per cent since 2012, even as cancer diagnoses rose by about 10 per cent, according to the Singapore Cancer Registry Annual Report 2023.

	2008-2012	2019-2023
<b>Incidence:</b> Number of new cases of cancer per 100,000 people	222	244 (↑)
<b>Mortality:</b> Number of cancer deaths per 100,000 people	91	72 (↓)
<b>Survival:</b> Five-year relative survival* rate	53%	61% (↑)

\*Relative survival is an estimated percentage of cancer patients who survive compared with people of the same age and sex in the general population.

### Leading cancer types in Singapore (2019-2023): Top five for males and females

Top five cancers account for **more than 60 per cent** of the total cases



Source: NATIONAL REGISTRY OF DISEASES OFFICE STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS