

CANCER CLUSTER FACT SHEET

Cancer is a term that includes more than 100 different diseases, each characterized by the uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells. A **CANCER CLUSTER** is the occurrence of a greater than expected number of cases of a specific type of cancer within a small area or within a short period of time.

Cancer is one of America's greatest public health concerns. About two in five people in the United States will be diagnosed with cancer sometime in their life. In 2020, cancer was the second leading cause of death in the United States. In Idaho, for the 5-year period of 2016–2020, cancer accounted for about 21% of deaths and was the second leading cause of death. When someone is diagnosed with or dies from cancer, family, friends, and neighbors sometimes learn of other cases of cancer in their community. This apparent clustering of cancers is often reported to health departments or the media. However, closer inspection usually reveals that these “suspected” clusters involve several different types of cancer among persons of different ages, sexes, and occupations. A “real” cancer cluster will usually involve one type or site of cancer.

When several cancers occur within a limited area, this may represent a real cluster, but it may not be the result of an increased community risk of cancer. For example, in Idaho there are 44 counties and every year, about half of the counties have rates of cancer that are above the average county value, and about half have rates that are below the average value. Counties may have above average rates one year and the next year the same counties may have rates below the average. This variation is expected and is more pronounced as the population being studied gets smaller (county, city, ZIP Code, neighborhood). Investigations of hundreds of reports of cancer clusters over many years by numerous states have shown approximately 15% of reported cancer clusters to be real clusters, based upon statistical evidence.

Cancer clusters that are a public health concern are the ones that represent a group of people at unusually high risk of cancer due to some factor or exposure that they have in common. Most commonly, cancer clusters are related to lifestyle factors, such as smoking or obesity, as opposed to a common environmental exposure. Sometimes, a study of these clusters can help prevent further cancers through targeted prevention or help us understand more about specific risks for cancer. Understanding the reasons for elevated cancer risk may take months or longer, and the reasons are not always resolved. Less than 5% of all cluster reports fall into this category of a meaningful cluster.

Cancer cluster investigations require data on the total number of residents and the number of diagnosed cancer cases in the area to be reviewed. At present time, the Cancer Data Registry of Idaho can investigate cancer incidence for several levels of geography: public health district, county, and census tract.

For more information regarding cancer clusters, contact:

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