Impact of smoking on cancer mortality trends in Ontario

Lung cancer is the most common cancer cause of death in both men and women, and most lung cancers are caused by smoking tobacco. The impact of smoking rates on cancer mortality is evident by comparing mortality from all cancers combined with mortality excluding lung cancer (noting, however, that lung cancer is not the only cancer causally related to smoking and therefore this comparison underestimates the true impact of tobacco on cancer mortality).

Without lung cancer as a cause of death, cancer mortality rates would have been largely stable in men, with a gradual decline in more recent years resulting in rates 7% lower than those in 1950. In women, cancer mortality rates would have been declining steadily over the past 55 years, and would now be 28% lower than in 1950 – a striking decline in cancer mortality masked by the upward trend in lung cancer deaths in women.

The trends for males reflect the rapid increase in uptake of smoking during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s and declining tobacco use beginning around the mid-1960s.\(^1\)

Women started smoking in significant numbers much later than men, resulting in no or little impact on overall cancer mortality rates until the 1960s. Since then, lung cancer mortality has risen substantially among women. Smoking rates have been declining in Ontario women since about 1980, so that smoking-related cancer mortality rates are expected to begin to stabilize soon.\(^2\)
Smoking rates continue to be too high: over 20% of Ontario adults report being current smokers*. Tobacco use will thus remain a major cause of premature death due to cancer in both men and women for decades to come.1

For more information, see:

- your health care provider or call the Canadian Cancer Society’s Cancer Information Service (1–888–939–3333)

References

*Current smoker: daily or occasional smoker aged 20 years or older who smoked at least 100 cigarette in lifetime and at least 1 cigarette in the past 30 days.

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