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Alberta cancer rates continue to trend downwards

EDMONTON – The rate at which Albertans are being diagnosed with cancer, or dying from the disease, is continuing to decrease, according to newly released data from Alberta Health Services (AHS).

Alberta's cancer incidence rates have steadily declined by about one per cent annually between 2002 and 2012. Mortality rates have also decreased over the past 20 years, falling by 2.2 per cent annually between 2005 and 2012.

"We're making tremendous progress with cancer control in Alberta," says Dr. Paul Grundy, Chief Program Officer and Senior Medical Director, CancerControl Alberta, AHS.

"Albertans with cancer are living longer now than they did 20 years ago, proving that we are providing the right treatments and care."

The data in the 2012 report shows the significant impact early detection and cancer screening can have on a patient's rate of survival and years lived. CancerControl Alberta has a number of effective screening and prevention programs and continues to expand these services every year.

Monica Schwann, Director of Screening Programs with AHS, says the Screening for Life program aims to see fewer Albertans die from cancers, including breast and colorectal, by providing information, education and support so the people of Alberta can make informed decision and take action to secure their own health by getting screened for cancer.

"When we find cancer early, we have the best chance of treating it," she says. "We want Albertans to know what screening options are available to them and we need everyone to take personal responsibility for their health and well-being by asking their doctor about what cancer screening programs are right for them."

In 2012, the most commonly diagnosed cancers in Alberta were breast, prostate, lung and colorectal. Combined, they accounted for 53 per cent of new cases and about half of cancer deaths in the province. However, the data also showed that cancers diagnosed in earlier stages (Stages I and II) lead to a better chance of survival.

"Detecting cancer early can increase chances of survival, we already know this, but now we have even more data that proves how vital cancer screening really is," says Schwann. "It literally saves lives."

Colorectal cancer patients diagnosed in Stages I and II are 90 per cent as likely to be alive three years after diagnosis as someone the same age who is cancer-free. Patients diagnosed in Stage IV are 19 per cent as likely to survive for three years compared to someone the same age that is cancer-free. Similarly, for breast cancer patients, the ratio is 98 per cent for an early diagnosis in Stage I and II and 39 per cent for a late diagnosis in Stage IV.

The data proves that early detection increases chances of survival; this fact is likely why it is one of the four official themes for World Cancer Day on Feb. 4.

“In preparation for World Cancer Day, CancerControl Alberta and AHS encourage Albertans who have no symptoms of cancer to get screened for breast and colorectal cancer in order to find changes early — and treat them if necessary,” says Dr. Grundy.

“We want all Albertans to make cancer screening part of their medical conversation.”

The 2012 Report on Cancer Statistics in Alberta (<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/1774.asp>) is a biennial look at trends in new cases of cancer and deaths due to cancer over the past 20 years. This report provides detailed information on prevalence, projections, the chances of survival, lifetime risk of developing/dying from cancer and potential years of life lost from all cancers combined, the top 10 cancers and childhood cancers.

The report also shows that the increase in new cancer cases over the past 20 years is mainly attributable to population growth and an aging population. In 2012, 16,330 new cancer cases were diagnosed in Alberta.

CancerControl Alberta encourages all Albertans to be conscious of the variety of lifestyle choices – including diet, tobacco use, physical activity and time spent in the sun – that can affect the likelihood of developing certain cancers. Visit www.albertapreventscancer.ca for more information.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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