

CANCER CONCERNS IN WISCONSIN COMMUNITIES



It's common for people to develop cancer during their lifetime, but when groups or clusters of people who live or work in the same area have cancer, it can make us wonder if it is from a common environmental cause.



Cancer is a very common disease.

- About 1 in 3 people will get cancer during their lifetime.
- The most common cancers in Wisconsin are breast, prostate, lung, colorectal, and skin.
- Cancer is a leading cause of death in Wisconsin.



Cancer clusters with a common environmental cause are extremely rare.

There are many reasons for this:

Clusters can be random. Because cancer is a common disease, cases of cancer can appear to cluster even when there is no connection among them. Pretend you are playing pool. You take the first shot and hit all the balls. Some of the time, they are going to end up touching each other by chance. In the same way, multiple cases of cancer can happen in a small community, even though it seems unusual. We investigate when this happens, but like on the pool table, it's often a random event.

Cancer is more common as we get older. While cancer occurs in people of all ages, cancer rates rise sharply among people over 45 years of age. For example, we expect to see more cancer in communities where the majority of residents are over 60 years of age, compared to a community with mixed ages.

People typically have different types of cancer.

Researchers have identified more than a hundred different kinds of cancer, many of which have different or unknown causes. If people in your community have many different kinds of cancer, it is unlikely they were caused by the same thing. If a cluster were to arise from a common cause or exposure, we would expect to see cases of a single type of cancer.

Certain genes increase the risk of cancer. Some types of cancers can happen in multiple people in the same family by genes passed down from one generation to another.

Cancer can take a long time to develop. Cancer from environmental exposures can take years or decades to develop. People are often not in one place for that long, so determining when someone may have been exposed is difficult. During 2010-2015, over a third of people in the U.S. had moved within the past five years.





We collect information on cancer concerns in Wisconsin communities.

When we receive a call from someone worried about cancer in their community, we will want to know:

Information about the caller. We ask the caller for their name, phone number, email address, and mailing address. We also ask if the caller is a concerned citizen, doctor, elected representative, etc. Callers can choose to not give this information.

Information about cancer cases, such as:

- Which types of cancers are you seeing? How many cases of each cancer are you aware of?
- How did you learn about these cancers?
- Are there family members with the same cancer?
- What age groups, races, and genders have these cancers?
- When were these cancers identified?
- Where are these cancers happening?
- What do you think could be the environmental cause?
- When do you think people were exposed to the suspected environmental cause?

Based on the answers to these questions, we discuss whether there is enough evidence to do a deeper exploration, which includes more in-depth interviews and an environmental scan.



We're here to answer your questions.

If you have concerns about cancer in your community, contact us at dhsenvhealth@wi.gov. Please consider the questions above since they will be used to guide our conversation.

To learn more about cancer, visit dhs.wisconsin.gov/cancer and cdc.gov/cancer. To find cancer support programs and services in your area, visit cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services.html.

