Depression Linked to Early Death in People With Metastatic Lung Cancer

Anxiety wasn't associated with increased risk, but persistent depression may be a warning flag for people with metastatic lung cancer.

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Experiencing anxiety and depression after being diagnosed with metatstatic lung cancer is common. Usually, the symptoms of these conditions improve after a few months. But when depression, in particular, does not abate, that may be a warning sign.

Study findings published online in the journal Psychosomatic Medicine show that unabated severe depression among patients with non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC), the most common form of the disease, shortened life span, reports a press release from The Ohio State University.

Researchers studied 157 participants with Stage IV metastatic NSCLC at Ohio State University's Comprehensive Cancer Center. Scientists ascertained patients' symptoms of depression and anxiety when they enrolled in the study upon being diagnosed for cancer. Investigators then conducted monthly evaluations for the next eight months, followed by evaluations every other month, for a total of two years.

The scientists controlled for other factors that affect survival, such as age, race, employment status, income levels and smoking status. They also controlled for the kinds of cancer therapy participants underwent as well as marital status and education—key factors that prior inquiries into mental state and lung cancer survival have not previously assessed.

Results showed that most patients' symptoms of depression and anxiety tended to lift over time. Anxiety, even if it persisted through two years, did not have any meaningful impact on patients' survival.

But depression was different. While mild depression was not a risk factor, individuals with moderate to severe symptoms of depression who did not experience a reduction in these signs over the next few months, up to two years, were liable to die earlier.

For instance, three months after being diagnosed, patients with no depression or with mild levels of depression had a more than 50% chance of surviving one year and three months. In comparison, survival rates for those with moderate to severe levels of depression were closer to

30%.

“This study shows that what happens to depression levels after diagnosis in the months thereafter [is] key to understanding how depression relates to premature death,” noted Barbara Andersen, MA, PhD, a professor in the university’s department of psychology and the lead author of the study.

To learn more about techniques that can help manage cancer-related depression, read “Mindfulness Meditation Reduces Depression in Young Breast Cancer Survivors.”

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