

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 cancer within a small area or within a short period of time.

Cancer is one of America's greatest public health concerns. One in two men and one in three women in the United States will be diagnosed with cancer sometime in their life. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in both the United States and Idaho. In Idaho, cancer accounted for about 22 percent of deaths in 2005. 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. These cancer cases often have little or nothing in common (for example, some may have recently moved into the area), and are therefore not a "real" cancer cluster.

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. 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 percent 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 who are at unusually high risk of cancer due to some factor or exposure that they have in common. A study of these clusters is sometimes necessary for the prevention of further cancers and to help understand more about specific risks for cancer. Understanding the reasons why the cancer risk is elevated may take months or longer, and the reasons are not always resolved. Less than 5 percent 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 is able to investigate cancer incidence for several levels of geography: county, ZIP Code, and Census Tract.

For more information regarding cancer clusters, contact:

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