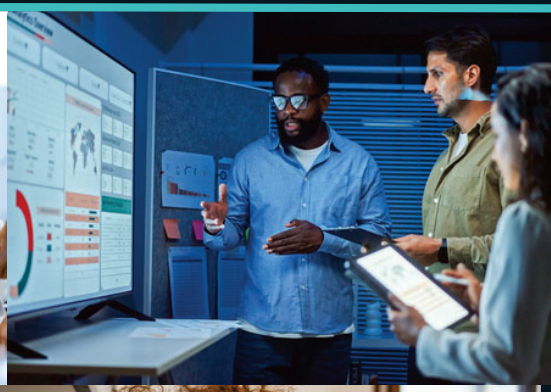
Hwb Gwyddorau Bywyd Cymru
Life Sciences Hub Wales

The future of cancer care in Wales: Trends in cancer statistics

Executive summary





Trends in cancer statistics

Cancer remains a major public health challenge in Wales, with increasing incidence rates and significant disparities in mortality outcomes. This trend, influenced by demographic shifts, lifestyle factors, and advancements in diagnostics, is putting considerable pressure on the healthcare system.

Understanding cancer trends is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of cancer care, informing resource allocation, and addressing regional and socio-economic inequalities. To this end, this report provides an in-depth analysis of cancer trends in Wales, examining factors such as rising cancer types, mortality disparities, early detection, treatment advances, and NHS capacity to meet demand.

Trends in cancer incidence

- Overall incidence: Between 2002 and 2019, cancer incidence in Wales increased from 16,055 cases to 20,392 (+27%), with an average annual rise of 1.4%.The COVID-19 pandemic led to a 14.2% drop in diagnosed cases in 2020, but numbers rebounded in 2021. However, they remained 3.9% below the pre-pandemic average.

- Incidence by type: In 2021, the most commonly diagnosed cancers were breast, colorectal, prostate, and lung. These four types account for over 50% of all cancer diagnoses in Wales. The incidence of liver cancer and melanoma more than doubled from 2002 to 2021. The incidence of some cancers declined over the same period, including bladder (-39%), stomach (-30%), and leukaemia (-27%).

- Incidence by age: Cancer incidence is strongly linked to age. Incidence rate increases with age with the most rapid increases occurring after the age of 50. Nearly 80% of all cancer cases occur in individuals aged 60 and over.



Trends in cancer survival

- Cancer survival rates in Wales have improved overall. One-year survival rates increased from 66.2% in 2002 to 71.6% in 2020, while five-year survival rose from 51.7% in 2002 to 63.0% in 2017. However, disparities persist, with five-year survival rates being significantly lower in deprived areas.

- Survival improvements are noted across many cancer types, with lung cancer seeing the largest relative increase in one-year survival from 2002 to 2020.

- Early stage diagnoses significantly boost survival rates. Some cancers show near 100% one-year survival when diagnosed at stage 1, but survival rates can drop dramatically at later stages.

Trends in cancer waiting times

- The backlog caused by the pandemic has further strained waiting times, with an increasing proportion of patients waiting beyond the 62-day target.

- As of April 2024, only 53.8% of patients started treatment within 62 days of suspicion, falling short of the 80% target set for 2026.

- Whilst some tumour sites are already exceeding the 80% target (e.g. skin cancer), certain cancers face more significant delays, with the worst-performing tumour sites being head and neck cancers (26%), gynaecological cancers (31%), and lower gastrointestinal cancers (33%). Cancer treatment delays are not unique to Wales, as similar trends have been observed across England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, where all UK nations have struggled to manage diagnostic backlogs and rising referrals.

Key insights

1. Rising cancer incidence

Cancer diagnoses in Wales have steadily increased over the past two decades, which have largely been driven by an ageing population. As more people surpass the age of 65, the overall cancer burden is expected to continue rising.

Projections indicate that, without significant interventions, this trend will continue over the next decade, placing increased pressure on healthcare services.

2. Changing prevalence of specific cancers

The prevalence of specific cancers in Wales has shifted, influenced by lifestyle, behavioural, and demographic factors, alongside advancements in early detection and treatment. Melanoma and liver cancer have seen significant rises, with melanoma linked to past sun exposure habits and liver cancer driven by obesity, alcohol consumption, and smoking. Conversely, bladder and stomach cancer incidences have declined, partly due to changes in diagnostic classifications and improved food preservation respectively. Lung cancer remains the leading cause of cancer-related deaths, reflecting persistent late-stage diagnoses and socioeconomic disparities, although declining smoking rates may improve future outcomes.

3. Socioeconomic and geographical divide

Cancer incidence and outcomes display a socioeconomic and geographical divide. Higher cancer rates are prevalent in more deprived areas, driven by factors such as higher smoking rates, poor diet, and limited access to healthcare services. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these disparities, with slower recovery in cancer diagnosis rates in these communities. Geographical differences also reflect variations in population age and access to healthcare, contributing to uneven cancer incidence across regions.



4. Progress in cancer mortality, but not for all types

Cancer mortality in Wales has declined by 16.3% since 2002, reflecting advances in early diagnosis, prevention strategies, improved treatments, and policy changes. Despite overall progress, lung and liver cancers remain major concerns due to late-stage diagnoses and lifestyle factors, prompting efforts like targeted lung cancer screening and integrated smoking cessation support to improve outcomes.

5. Rising cancer survival and challenges of diagnosis and survivorship

Cancer survival rates in Wales have significantly improved. However, survival varies widely by cancer type and stage at diagnosis, highlighting the need for better screening and faster referrals. Improved cancer survival indicates a growing population of cancer survivors in Wales who will require follow-up care.

6. Challenges in waiting times and NHS capacity

The failure to meet the 62-day treatment target for a significant proportion of patients highlights the strain on the NHS in Wales. The fact that certain cancers (e.g. skin cancer) meet the target while others (e.g. gynaecological and lower gastrointestinal cancers) have much lower compliance rates indicates an imbalance in resources and diagnostic capacity. If waiting time targets remain unmet, more patients will be diagnosed at later stages, leading to increased demand for complex and costly treatments.

Want to read more?

Email hello@lshubwales.com to get the full report, accessing key insights, statistics and know-how about the Welsh cancer landscape.

About Sector Intelligence

Our team gathers and analyses insights on market trends, customer needs and the wider industry landscape. This shapes strategies, identifies risks and finds new growth opportunities. Commissioning organisations include SMEs, health boards, Welsh Government, academia and SMEs.

About Life Sciences Hub Wales

We drive the development and adoption of life sciences innovation in health and social care in Wales. We're a dynamic interface, connecting life sciences innovators with research partners, funding opportunities, end users and frontline health and social care teams to support well-being and ultimately generating growth, jobs and prosperity across Wales.

How we can help you

Find out how our support can help your innovation reach the frontline by emailing hello@lshubwales.com.

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