

Breast cancer in older women

Number of older women living with breast cancer to almost quadruple by 2040

The number of older women (aged 65 and over) living with breast cancer in the UK will **almost quadruple over the next 30 years**. By 2040 there will be **more than one million older women living with breast cancer**.

- Today there are around 340,000 older women (aged 65 and over) living with breast cancer in the UK (out of a total of around 570,000 women of all ages living with breast cancer). By 2040, this is projected to increase to 1.2 million (out of a total of 1.68 million) – an almost four-fold increaseⁱ.

By 2040, **almost three-quarters of all women living with breast cancer** in the UK will be aged over 65.

- The proportion of older women (aged 65 and over) living with breast cancer will increase from 59% today to 73% in 2040ⁱ.

The projected increase in the number of older women (aged 65 and over) living with breast cancer is **almost double the increase for younger age groups**.

- In women aged 44 and under, the number living with breast cancer will increase from around 23,000 today to around 44,000 in 2040 – almost twice as many. In those

aged 45-64, the number will increase from around 209,000 today to around 418,000 in 2040 – twice as manyⁱ.

By 2040 breast cancer will account for **more than half of all cancer cases in women** in the UK.

- The proportion of cancer cases in women that are breast cancer will increase from 46% today to 54% in 2040ⁱ.

Cancer stage at diagnosis

Older women are **46% more likely to be diagnosed with an advanced stage** of breast cancer than younger women. The opposite is true for lung cancer — older women are more likely to be diagnosed with a less advanced stage of disease than younger women — this suggests the difference seen with breast cancer is unlikely to be simply a matter of age.

- Women aged 75-79 are 46% more likely to be diagnosed with stage III or IV breast cancer than those aged 65-69, who are just 10 years youngerⁱⁱ.

Access to treatment

Older women are **less likely to receive certain types of treatment** for breast cancer than younger women.

- Only 39% of women aged over 80 in the UK receive surgery for breast cancer, compared with 90% of women under 50ⁱⁱⁱ. Although older women are more likely than younger women to have health problems in addition to cancer (co-morbidities), this only accounts for some of the difference. After taking co-morbidities into account, women aged 75-79 in the UK are almost half as likely to receive surgery as women aged 65-69^{iv}, who are just 10 years younger.
- Only 8% of those aged 60-69 undergo breast reconstruction, compared with 17% of those aged 50-59ⁱⁱⁱ, who are just 10 years younger.
- Fewer than 40% of women aged over 80 receive breast-conserving surgery (when diagnosed via symptoms rather than screening), compared with more than half of those aged 50-59ⁱⁱⁱ.

Breast cancer screening

More than half of breast cancer deaths in the UK are in women aged over 70^v, but the NHS breast screening programme currently stops inviting women for screening at 70*.

The research

The figures above (excluding 'Cancer stage at diagnosis', 'Access to treatment' and 'Breast cancer screening') are from a study published

in the *British Journal of Cancer*. The study makes, for the first time, long-term projections of the number of people living with a cancer diagnosis in the UK (cancer prevalence).

Cancer prevalence is increasing for several reasons. For example, cancer is more common in older people, and the UK's population is growing and ageing; the overall number of cancer cases is increasing; and cancer survival rates are improving.

References and notes

ⁱ Maddams J, Utley M, Møller H. Projections of cancer prevalence in the United Kingdom, 2010-2040. *Br J Cancer* 2012; **107**: 1195-1202.

ⁱⁱ G Lyratzopoulos, G A Abel, J M Barbiere *et al*. Variation in advanced stage at diagnosis of lung and female breast cancer in an English region 2006–2009. *Br J Cancer* 2012; **106**: 1068–1075.

ⁱⁱⁱ National Cancer Intelligence Network (NCIN). The Second All Breast Cancer Report, 2011 <http://www.ncin.org.uk/view.aspx?rid=612> (Accessed October 2012)

^{iv} Lavelle K, Downing A, Thomas J *et al*. Are lower rates of surgery amongst older women with breast cancer in the UK explained by co-morbidity? *Br J Cancer* 2012; **107**: 1175–1180.

^v Cancer Research UK. *Breast cancer – UK mortality statistics*. <http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-info/cancerstats/types/breast/mortality/#age> (Accessed October 2012)

* In England, the upper age limit for routine screening invitations is increasing gradually to 73.

To read more about the issues facing older people with cancer, read [The Age Old Excuse: The Under-treatment of Older Cancer Patients](#).

To read more about cancer in older people, read [The Rich Picture on Older People with Cancer](#).