

Cancer Clusters

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease in which some of the body's cells grow too much and spread to other parts of the body.

- **Cancer is not one disease, but many.** There are more than **100** types of cancer. Each has different, and often unknown, causes and risk factors.
- **Cancer is much more common than most people think.** About **four out of 10** men and women will get cancer at some point during their life.¹ In Ohio, an average of **69,000** new cases of cancer were diagnosed each year from 2016-2020.²
- **Cancer is the second-leading cause of death in the United States and Ohio.** About **25,000** Ohioans die each year from cancer.³

¹ Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results Program, National Cancer Institute, 2023, based on 2017-2019 data.

² Ohio Cancer Incidence Surveillance System, Ohio Department of Health, 2023.

³ U.S. Cancer Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Cancer Institute, 2023; Ohio Bureau of Vital Statistics, Ohio Department of Health, 2023.

What is a cancer cluster?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), a cancer cluster is:

“A greater than expected number of the same or etiologically related cancer cases that occurs within a group of people in a geographic area over a defined period of time.”

Another way to think of a cancer cluster is:

A group of people who live in the same area and get sick with the same or similar type of cancer all around the same time.

What causes cancer clusters?

Cancer is common throughout our nation which makes it a challenge to know if a cancer cluster is occurring. Sometimes, a high number of people become sick with cancer in the same location. This may be by chance, or it may be because of:

- More people screened for cancer.
- Few healthcare options in the area.
- Family history of cancer.
- Lifestyle risk factors like using tobacco.
- Work exposures.
- Environmental exposures.

What is a carcinogen?

A carcinogen is any substance that causes cancer. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has found 256 substances that are known or are reasonably anticipated (likely) to cause cancer in humans. Exposure to a carcinogen does not necessarily mean that it will cause cancer. Whether a carcinogen will cause cancer depends on many factors, including:

- **What you were exposed to:** Each substance causes cancer in a different way.
- **Amount of exposure:** How much of the substance was the person exposed to.
- **Duration of exposure:** How long was the person exposed.⁴

⁴ Environmental Carcinogens and Cancer Risk, National Cancer Institute, April 2023.

How can public health officials address community cancer concerns?

- Ohio's local health departments (LHDs) take the lead in responding to community cancer concerns. LHDs may review and analyze cancer data for a community, provide information and resources to concerned residents, and look into possible causes if the number and/or type(s) of cancer are unusual.
- The Ohio Department of Health can provide LHDs and the community with data from the Ohio Cancer Incidence Surveillance System (OCISS), Ohio's cancer registry, and assistance to LHDs, when needed.
- Health officials may use guidelines to address a cancer concern. In December 2022, the CDC and ATSDR released [Guidelines for Examining Unusual Patterns of Cancer and Environmental Concerns \(cdc.gov\)](#) to help health departments as they study patterns of disease in communities.

Resources

For more information, please visit the following websites:

Ohio Department of Health (ODH): <https://odh.ohio.gov/home>

- o Cancer Programs at ODH:
<https://odh.ohio.gov/know-our-programs/ohio-cancer-incidence-surveillance-system/Cancer-Programs-ODH>
- o Ohio Cancer Incidence Surveillance System (OCISS):
<https://odh.ohio.gov/know-our-programs/ohio-cancer-incidence-surveillance-system/welcome>
- o Cancer Data and Statistics:
<https://odh.ohio.gov/know-our-programs/ohio-cancer-incidence-surveillance-system/Data-Statistics>
- o Community Cancer Concerns:
<https://odh.ohio.gov/know-our-programs/ohio-cancer-incidence-surveillance-system/Community-Cancer>

American Cancer Society: <https://www.cancer.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/>

- o Unusual Patterns of Cancer, the Environment, and Community Concerns:
<https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/cancer-environment/>
- o How to Prevent Cancer or Find It Early:
<https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/dcpc/prevention/>

National Cancer Institute: <https://www.cancer.gov/>