

CANCER DEATHS FALL IN FRANCE

Cancer deaths have dropped 22 per cent among men in the past 20 years and 14 per cent among women. There were drops in all the cancer types, in all age ranges and in all regions of France, a study by national cancer institute INCA shows.

Better screening, new treatments and the fight against smoking and alcohol abuse have all helped. Even where cancers cannot be cured, people are living longer with them. Among men, the alcohol and smoking factor has had the strongest effect. The lower overall drop among women is mainly because women are smoking more than before. An INCA spokeswoman said: "Women are protected from certain cancers by hormones they produce, notably during maternity. Lifestyle risk factors are also lesser: they have traditionally drunk and smoked less, so there were fewer cancers of the digestive and urinary system and lungs, though, sadly the difference is becoming less; there are a lot more cases of women's lung cancer than before."

She said INCA believes, however, that the general trend of a lower overall death rate will continue: "Treatment is improving considerably. The survival rates for a lot of cancers are now at least 80 per cent: breast, cervix, testicle, leukaemia...because we have extremely powerful medicines and we are managing to diagnose cancers earlier."

Cancer is still, however, the most common cause of death for men in France and second most common for women. Prostate is the most common kind for men and breast for women. In total, from 2003 to 2007, an average of 150,000 people a year died of cancer. The INCA spokeswoman said: "The key thing is for people to go and be screened. The more they do, the earlier we pick up on cancers and the fewer deaths there will be." Women are invited to be screened at 50 for cervical, breast and colonic cancer, and men for colonic. Screening the whole population is not necessarily useful because prostate cancer often develops very slowly and it may not be worth treating: there can be more damage from the treatment, such as incontinence or impotence.

Plans are now under way to screen women aged 40-50 if they are at risk, childless women, people who have had long hormonal treatments and women who smoke a lot. The international Globocan study, which monitors cancer trends, shows that, in 2008, male cancer deaths in France were down to 144 per 100,000 and women's to 77, better than the European average. Britain's figures were 133 and 102. In other words, men are more likely and women less likely to die of cancer in France compared to the UK.