

Misconception 1—Cancer rates are soaring in the United States and Canada

Overall cancer death rates in Canada (excluding lung cancer due to smoking) have declined 17% in women and 5% in men since 1971 (National Cancer Institute of Canada 2001). In the United States, the decline is similar: overall cancer death rates (excluding lung cancer) have declined 19% since 1950 (Ries & al. 2000).

In Canada, the types of cancer deaths that have decreased since 1971 are primarily stomach, cervical, and colorectal (National Cancer Institute of Canada 2001). Those that have increased are primarily lung cancer (80%–90% is due to smoking in Canada (American Cancer Society 2000; Manuel & Hockin 2000)), melanoma (probably due to sunburns), and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (National Cancer Institute of Canada 2001). If lung cancer is included, current cancer mortality rates (Ries & al. 2000) are similar to those in 1972 (National Cancer Institute of Canada 2001). For some cancers, mortality rates have begun to decline due in part to early detection, treatment, and improved survival (American Cancer Society 2000; Linet & al. 1999), as is the case with breast cancer in women (National Cancer Institute of Canada 2001; Peto & al. 2000). The rise in incidence rates in older age groups for some cancers can

be explained by known factors such as improved screening (Bailar & Gornik 1997; Devesa & al. 1995; Doll & Peto 1981; Peto & al. 2000): “The reason for not focusing on the reported incidence of cancer is that the scope and precision of diagnostic information, practices in screening and early detection, and criteria for reporting cancer have changed so much over time that trends in incidence are not reliable” (Bailar & Gornik 1997: 1569–70). Changes in incidence rates are thus complicated to interpret. For some cancers, in addition to earlier screening and diagnosis, increases in incidence over time are known to be associated with lifestyle factors; e.g. for breast cancer, having fewer children and having them later in life.

Life expectancy has continued to rise since 1921 (Anderson 1999; Manuel & Hockin 2000): in Canada, life expectancy in the early 1920s was 59 years (<http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/People/Health/health26.htm>); today it is about 79 years (World Health Organization 1984). Trends in the United States are similar to those in Canada (Anderson 1999).