

## Cancer Advances: Significant Proportion of Husbands Told that Wife's Cancer Was Incurable Late or Not at All, According to Swedish Study

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A study conducted in Sweden found that more than 40 percent of widowers in that country whose wives had died from cancer four or five years earlier reported they were either never told that their spouse's cancer was incurable, or they heard this information during the last week of her life. Eighty-six percent of widowers believed next-of-kin should be told immediately when a wife's cancer is incurable, including 71 percent of the men who said they did not recall being told this information. The study, which is the largest to explore this topic, was published online in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*.

Researchers surveyed 691 men in Sweden whose wives had died of breast, ovarian, or colon cancer in 2000 or 2001. The widowers were asked whether they were told about the extent of their wives' disease, and if so, when and by whom. They were also asked about their desire to learn such information.

Twenty percent of the men reported they were never told that the wife's cancer was incurable; 21 percent said they learned the same day or within the week before her death. Twenty four percent of men learned the information two weeks to two months before her death; 14 percent learned three to five months before; and 21 percent learned more than six months prior. Most (79 percent) of the men who were informed that their wife's cancer was incurable were told by the physician.

The study also found that 24 percent of men whose wives died of breast cancer reported they were not told their wives' illness was incurable, compared with 11 percent of widowers of women who died of ovarian cancer. The researchers speculated that because ovarian cancer is often diagnosed at an advanced stage, husbands may have known about the severity of their wives' illness.

### What This Means for Patients

Though this study was conducted in Sweden, attitudes about the communication of health information are similar between Sweden and the United States.

The researchers advise that cancer patients and their family members who desire clear information about the extent of a patient's disease and chance of a cure should inform their physicians of their wishes in a direct manner, and physicians are encouraged to ask patients and family members how much information they want to receive.

### Helpful Links:

[Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#) [2]

[Cancer Self-Advocacy](#) [3]

[End of Life Care](#) [4]

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.jco.org>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Newly+Diagnosed/Questions+to+Ask+the+Doctor>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/Self-Advocacy%3A+Participating+in+Your+Cancer+Care>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/End-of-Life+Care>