Cancer NEWS: Anxiety and depression sufferers 'at greater risk of developing disease'

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PEOPLE suffering from anxiety or depression may be at greater risk of dying from some cancers, according to new research.

The study published by The BMJ suggests that higher levels of psychological distress may be associated with an increased risk of death from certain cancers.

The researchers said their findings are observational, so no firm conclusions about cause and effect can be drawn.

But they said the findings add to growing evidence that depression and anxiety could predict certain physical conditions.

There is evidence that anxiety and depression are related to increased rates of cardiovascular disease, but links with different types of cancer have so far been unclear.

Researchers from University College London, Edinburgh University, and University of Sydney in Australia set out to examine if psychological distress is a potential predictor of death from certain forms of cancer.

The research team analysed figures from 16 studies - 13 from England and three from Scotland - which started between 1994 and 2008.

In total, 163,363 men and women aged 16 or over and free from cancer at the start of the study, were included.

Psychological distress scores were measured using a general health questionnaire and participants were monitored for an average of nine-and-a-half years.

During this time, there were 4,353 deaths from cancer.

Rare cancers you've probably never heard of

Several factors that could have influenced the results were taken into account, including age, sex, education, socioeconomic status, BMI, smoking and alcohol intake.

Study lead author Dr David Batty, of University College London, said: “After statistical control for these factors, the results show that compared with people in the least distressed group, death rates in the most distressed group were consistently higher for cancer of the bowel, prostate, pancreas, and oesophagus and for leukaemia.”

The researchers said the association may also be affected by reverse causality, where undiagnosed early cancer might have had an underlying impact on mood.

In a bid to correct for this, they carried out a further analysis excluding study participants who died in the first five years of follow-up.

But that made no difference to the findings - the links between distress and cancer remained.

Dr Batty added: “Our findings contribute to the evidence that poor mental health might have some predictive capacity for certain physical diseases but we are a long way off from knowing if these relationships are truly causal.”