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Height may be linked to cancer risk

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By Sally Robertson, BSc

Taller individuals are more likely to develop cancer than shorter people, according to the results of a study presented at the 54th Annual European Society for Pediatric Endocrinology Meeting in Barcelona.

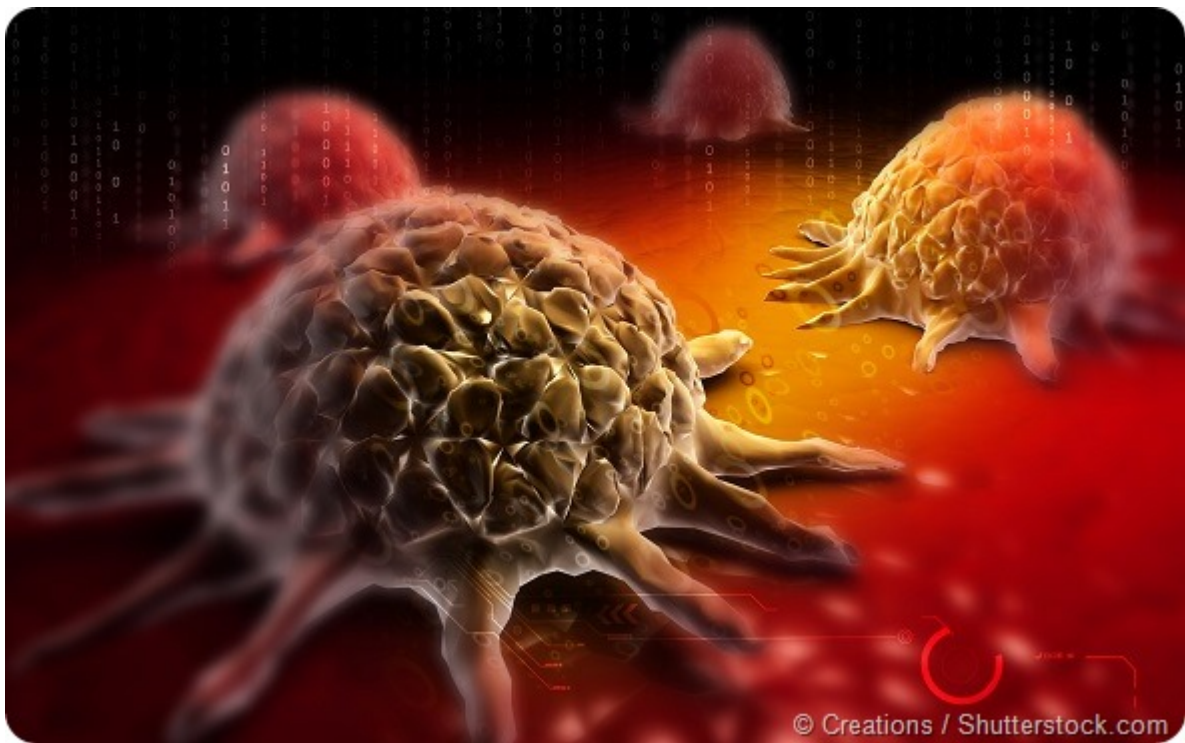


The link between height and cancer has been demonstrated in previous studies, but it has never been studied on such a large scale before. Emelie Benyi, who led the research says:

To our knowledge, this is the largest study performed on linkage between height and cancer including both women and men."

Researchers from the Karolinska Institutet and University of Stockholm analyzed data on 5.5 million people born between 1938 and 1991, with adult heights ranging from 3 ft 3" to 7 ft 6". Data on height was collected from the Swedish Medical Birth, the Swedish Conscription and the Swedish Passport Registers, while data on cancer was obtained from the Swedish Cancer Register.

Benyi and team followed the participants once they reached the age of 20 (in 1958), through to the end of 2011. They found that the risk of women developing any form of cancer increased by 18% for every 10 cm increase in height, while among men, the risk increased by 11%. In addition, taller women had a 20% greater likelihood of developing breast cancer and the risk of melanoma increased by around 30% for every 10 cm height increase among both men and women.



Benyi says there are several possible reasons for the link.

One is that taller people have a larger number of cells in their body, which could potentially transform to cancer. It could also be that taller individuals have a higher energy intake, which has previously been linked to cancer.”

The researchers emphasise that the results reflect the incidence of cancer on a population level and since cancer cause is multifactorial, it is difficult to say what impact the results have on cancer risk at an individual level.

A breast cancer charity have urged women who are taller not to be concerned about developing the disease. Although the results suggest a potential link between being taller and an increased risk of breast cancer, this does not necessarily mean that a woman will develop the cancer just because she is tall.

Benyi and colleagues now plan to examine how death due to cancer and other causes are linked to height in the Swedish population. "Our studies show that taller individuals are more likely to develop cancer but it is unclear so far if they also have a higher risk of dying from cancer or have an increased mortality overall," she says.

Sources:

- http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2015-10/bl-lbh092915.php
 - <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/oct/01/taller-people-more-likely-to-get-cancer-say-researchers>
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