

Families With a History of Cancer Face Various Types of Debt Even Years After Diagnosis

Family medical debt increased by 24% following diagnoses of major chronic diseases, while family income generally declined by 11%.

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Patients diagnosed with major diseases, including cancer, often experience financial hardship due to high out-of-pocket medical costs in the United States. However, little is known about changes in income, wealth, and debt before and after major disease diagnoses.

New data by researchers at the [American Cancer Society](#) (ACS) shows these families face various new types of debts, especially medical debt, after diagnoses. Moreover, new diagnoses of cancer is associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing medical debt. The findings will be presented at the annual [American Society of Clinical Oncology \(ASCO\) Quality Care Symposium](#) in San Francisco, September 27-28, 2024.

In the study, led by [Dr. Shu Liu](#), postdoctoral fellow, health services research at the American Cancer Society, and to be presented by senior author [Dr. Zhiyuan Zheng](#), scientists identified families with new diagnoses of major diseases using the 2011-2021 Panel Study of Income Dynamics data. Family characteristics included age, sex, marital status, family size, number of dependent children living in the family, employment status, and baseline health conditions. Family income was assessed by the total income in the corresponding tax year, which consisted of combined taxable and transfer income of the response person, spouse/partner, and other family members.

Researchers identified a total of 14,715 families with and without new disease diagnoses. Among families diagnosed with new diseases, cancer (6.6%), arthritis (17.5%), asthma (8.5%), high blood pressure (20.9%), diabetes (9%), heart-related diseases (24.7%), lung-related diseases (8.6%), and stroke (4.2%) were included in analyses.

Family medical debt increased 24.2% (\$558) following diagnoses of major chronic diseases, meanwhile, their family income generally declined by 10.8% (\$9 233). Compared to families without diagnoses of new diseases, total family debt was 32.1% (\$835) higher among those diagnosed with new diseases.

Scientists stress policies to prevent and alleviate medical debt as well as efforts to identify family changes in debt and income before and after major chronic diseases, including cancer, are warranted.

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