

# St Helens

## High rates of cancer or not?

### Questions and answers

#### **Is there more cancer in St Helens than elsewhere in Tasmania?**

No. People living in St Helens do not have more cancer than other people in Tasmania.

There is no evidence of a cancer cluster or unusual cancer types, rates or trends in St Helens between 1993 and 2007 (the latest data available to date).

Data for St Helens and the Break O'Day Local Government Area (LGA) show similar cancer rates to Tasmania as a whole.

The overall rate of cancer in Tasmania from 1994 – 2005 is generally higher than the national average. There are well-recognised reasons for this including social factors underlying our higher smoking rates, alcohol consumption, physical inactivity and poor diet.

The rates and patterns of cancer in St Helens do not suggest an environmental cause, but DHHS will continue to monitor cancer rates in the area.

#### **Is information about cancer rates available specifically for St Helens?**

Yes. Because of concerns raised about drinking water safety, the Director of Public Health took the unusual step of asking the Tasmanian Cancer Registry to provide cancer data specifically for the St Helens drinking water supply area and the Break O'Day LGA.

The Registry does not generally provide information for individual towns because data for small populations can give a misleading picture, and patient confidentiality must be protected.

The data were analysed by epidemiologists and reported in the *St Helens Water District Cancer Investigation Summary Report, DHHS, June 2010*.

The numbers for some cancer types were too low to report for St Helens, so rates for the Break O'Day LGA are reported instead.

#### **How accurate are the findings?**

We are confident about the patterns and trends the data show, but it's important to note the area supplied by the St Helens drinking water system has just 2,645 residents (2006 census). In such small populations, year-by-year changes in rates often look bigger than they really are and are more likely to be affected by chance.

#### **Can I see the full report?**

The *Summary of the St Helens Water District Cancer Investigation for the George River Water Quality Panel, DHHS, June 2010* and other related information is available online at [www.dhhs.tas.gov.au](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au) and [www.georgeriverquality.org.au](http://www.georgeriverquality.org.au)

## **What were the key findings of the investigation?**

Taking the age and size of the St Helens population into account, there was no increase in cancer rates in the area between 1994 and 2005.

297 cancers were diagnosed in St Helens from 1993 to 2007. This was the same as expected (300), given the number of people in the area and their ages.

There is no evidence of an increased or unusually high number of rare or less common types of cancer in St Helens between 1993 and 2007. This includes gall bladder, head and neck, oesophageal and gastric (stomach) cancers, as well as Waldenstrom's Anaemia, all mentioned in the ABC's *Australian Story*.

There was a short-term increase in bowel cancer in St Helens in 2000 – 2001, but only for those two years.

## **What about the cancer rates for the Break O'Day LGA?**

In Break O'Day, 591 cancers were seen from 1993 – 2007. Given the number of people in the area, their ages and trends across Tasmania, on average 614 cancers could have been expected. Similarly, from 2002 -2006, 194 cancers were seen in the area while 203 could have been expected.

There was no significant change in the incidence of cancer in the area from 1993 – 2007.

## **What are the main causes of cancer in the St Helens area?**

The five most common cancers in St Helens, Break O'Day and Tasmania from 1993 – 2007 are: colorectal (bowel), prostate, lung, breast and skin cancer (melanoma). This is the same across Australia.

The numbers of these most common types of cancer in Break O'Day was similar to what could have been expected, except for significantly fewer cases of melanoma and a short period with significantly more cases of bowel cancer (2000 – 2001).

Cancer is common. In Tasmania today the risk for developing any cancer by age 75 is one in two for men and one in four for women.

Cancer risk is greatly affected by age. The Break O'Day LGA has less young people and more older people than the rest of Tasmania. This means a higher number of cancers can be expected in Break O'Day than in similar-sized but younger communities.

Taking age into account, the rate and pattern of cancer types in the Break O'Day LGA is similar to the rest of Tasmania.

Cancer is not one but many different diseases, each with its own risk factors. It is often not possible to know the cause of individual cases, but lifestyle choices increase the risk of some cancers. These lifestyle factors include smoking, risky alcohol consumption, physical inactivity and poor diet (e.g. not eating enough fruit and vegetables).

A 1998 DHHS survey of Break O'Day showed some of these risk factors were more common in Break O'Day than in Tasmania as a whole. Given this, cancer rates in the area may increase over time.