Mortality and Cancer Incidence Among Individuals With Down Syndrome

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Background: Individuals with Down syndrome (DS) have a predisposition to leukemia and possibly other cancers and excess mortality from other conditions, but information on the magnitude of risk associated with specific cancers or causes of death is sparse.

Methods: Mortality experience and cancer incidence were evaluated in a combined cohort of 4872 individuals with a hospital discharge diagnosis of DS in Sweden (1965-1993) or Denmark (1977-1989) by linkage to national cancer and vital statistics registries. Standardized incidence ratios (SIRs) and standardized mortality ratios (SMRs) were estimated by comparison with age, sex, and calendar-year expected values.

Results: Individuals with DS had an increased risk of incident acute lymphocytic (SIR, 24.2; 95% confidence interval [CI], 15.2-36.6; n=22) and acute nonlymphocytic (SIR, 28.2; 95% CI, 15.7-48.3; n=14) leukemias. Risks of testicular cancer (SIR, 3.7; 95% CI, 1.0-9.4; n=4) and liver cancer (SIR, 6.0; 95% CI, 1.2-17.5; n=3) were also elevated. Individuals with DS also experienced elevated mortality attributed to stomach cancer (SMR, 6.4; 95% CI, 1.7-16.4; n=4), dementia and Alzheimer disease (SMR, 54.1; 95% CI, 27.9-94.4), epilepsy (SMR, 30.4; 95% CI, 13.9-57.7), ischemic heart disease (SMR, 3.9; 95% CI, 2.7-5.4), other heart disease (SMR, 16.5; 95% CI, 11.0-23.7), cerebrovascular disease (SMR, 6.0; 95% CI, 3.5-9.6), infectious diseases (SMR, 12.0; 95% CI, 6.0-21.4), and congenital anomalies (SMR, 25.8; 95% CI, 21.0-31.4).

Conclusions: Individuals with DS have a substantially increased risk of mortality due to specific causes and may have an elevated risk of other incident cancers in addition to leukemia. These results provide clues regarding chromosome 21 gene involvement in diseases that complicate DS and are important for disease detection and care of affected individuals.

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individuals with DS may be related to interactions between genes and environmental exposures, providing hints regarding exposures that merit investigation as modifiers of genetic risk.

The availability of hospital discharge records throughout Sweden and Denmark and national registration numbers provided to each resident presented a rare opportunity to identify all individuals with a discharge diagnosis of DS and, by linkage of these data to national registries, to estimate cancer incidence and mortality risks.
than 5 years at hospital discharge; 30% were 20 years or older.

**CANCER INCIDENCE**

During follow-up, 67 individuals with DS developed incident cancers (Table 2).13 Of these, 36 (54%) were acute leukemias. The risk of all leukemias combined was increased approximately 20-fold. Risks of developing acute lymphocytic leukemia or acute nonlymphocytic leukemia were roughly equal, with each occurring approximately 26 times more frequently than in the general population. In the overall study cohort, 28 solid tumors were observed (vs 36.2 expected). Individuals with DS had a modestly elevated risk of cancers of the liver and testes, based on only a few cases at each site. Three of the 4 testicular neoplasms were seminomatous germ cell tumors, and the histologic origin of the fourth tumor was unknown. Risk of other male genital cancers was also elevated, based on 3 cases of penis cancer. Other cancers that were observed included non-Hodgkin lymphoma (n = 2), stomach cancer (n = 3), cancer of the small intestine (n = 1), colon cancer (n = 4), breast cancer (n = 3), endometrial cancer (n = 2), brain tumor (n = 2), kidney cancer (n = 1), and endocrine tumor (a parathyroid adenoma) (n = 1).

All but 1 leukemia case was diagnosed before age 20 years, but only 1 solid tumor (a kidney cancer at age 1 year) was diagnosed before age 20 years (Table 3).13 The altered risks of leukemia and solid tumors did not differ by sex (data not shown). Although solid tumor risk estimates were similar in Danish and Swedish individuals, the acute leukemia standardized incidence ratios were somewhat higher in the Danish cohort.

**MORTALITY**

Individuals with DS had an almost 8-fold increased risk of mortality from all causes during follow-up when deaths ascribed to DS itself (ICD-9 code 758) were excluded.
**Table 4. Standardized Mortality Ratios (SMRs) and 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) for Selected Medical Conditions Among Individuals With a Hospital Discharge Diagnosis of Down Syndrome in Sweden (1965-1993) and Denmark (1977-1989)**

![Image of the table](https://www.archinternmed.com/)

*†Deaths that were attributed to Down syndrome itself (ICD-9 code 758) were not included in either the “all-cause” or “congenital anomalies” mortality risk calculations. 

**Table 4.** The increases in mortality were generally similar in the 2 countries, although some differences were apparent when case numbers were small. Mortality due to infectious diseases was 12 times greater than expected, with septicemia and infectious hepatitis being the most common underlying cause of death (6 of 11 deaths). Mortality from malignant neoplasms was elevated 4-fold, primarily owing to leukemia, although there were also excesses owing to cancers of the stomach, liver, and gall-bladder, based on small numbers. Persons with DS also
experienced excess mortality due to diabetes mellitus, dementia (including Alzheimer disease), and neurologic conditions such as epilepsy and intracranial abscesses.

In addition, individuals with DS had a 4- to 16-fold excess risk of mortality from ischemic heart disease, other forms of heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, and venous thromboembolic disorders. Substantial increases in mortality were also attributed to respiratory diseases, notably pneumonia, bronchitis, and influenza. Also evident was excess mortality from gastric and duodenal ulcers and cirrhosis of the liver. There was considerably elevated mortality due to congenital anomalies, primarily of the heart and circulatory system. Deaths ascribed to DS itself (ICD-9 code 758; n = 227) were not included among the anomalies. The risk of death due to a variety of external causes was also increased.

COMMENT

In this cohort study of individuals with DS, there was an elevated risk of incident leukemia and liver, testicular, and penile cancers compared with the general population. In addition, overall mortality risks were almost 8-fold higher for individuals with DS, reflecting increased mortality attributed to leukemia and a variety of nonneoplastic conditions.

Our findings should be considered in light of possible methodologic limitations of the study. In particular, individuals with DS who were identified through a hospital register may constitute a selected population with a greater risk of mortality and cancer incidence than those not hospitalized. However, the substantially increased mortality risks observed in this study are less likely to be explained entirely by selection bias, an effect that should have been mitigated by the exclusion of all deaths and incident cancer diagnoses in the 12 months subsequent to discharge. We also could not take into account exposures such as smoking, nutrition, body mass index, physical activity, and infectious agents that may have contributed to the variations in disease risk, particularly among those with DS who were institutionalized.

The 12-fold excess mortality attributed to infectious diseases in this study may be associated with the impaired cellular and humoral immunity that has been described in individuals with DS, including lower or abnormal levels of total lymphocytes\textsuperscript{14,15} or specific T- or B-cell subpopulations,\textsuperscript{14,16,37} as well as a reduced proliferative response to mitogen challenge,\textsuperscript{14,16} compared with age-matched controls. Viral or bacterial infections were cited as the underlying cause for approximately one fifth of all deaths in this cohort and included those classified under ICD-9 as respiratory diseases (such as pneumonia, bronchitis, and influenza) and intracranial abscesses.\textsuperscript{18}

The 26-fold increases in the risk of incident acute lymphocytic leukemia and acute nonlymphocytic leukemia in this cohort are consistent with the elevated relative risks and confidence limits noted in previous cohort studies in Norway\textsuperscript{6} and the United States.\textsuperscript{19,20} Risk was highest among those aged 1 to 4 years, but it remained elevated compared with background rates until age 20 years. Our Danish study population includes some individuals with DS identified from the Danish Cytogenetics Registry who were recently reported to have an elevated risk of leukemia.\textsuperscript{21} In nested case-control studies\textsuperscript{22,23} using Swedish birth registry data, children who developed myeloid or lymphatic leukemia were substantially more likely to have DS, and a few children in those studies were included in our study population. The sharply elevated risk of acute leukemias in DS may be due in part to the additional copy of AML1, a leukemia-associated oncogene present on chromosome 21. Translocations involving AML1 (found in 13% of acute myeloid leukemias\textsuperscript{24} and 27% of acute lymphocytic leukemias\textsuperscript{25}) and chromosomal abnormalities such as acquired trisomy 21\textsuperscript{26} (found in 27% of acute myeloid leukemias and 16% of acute lymphocytic leukemias\textsuperscript{27}) are commonly seen in acute leukemias that arise in children without DS. Because the extra copy of AML1 alone is not sufficient to cause acute leukemia in all individuals with constitutional trisomy 21, additional genetic or environmental factors are probably involved.

Individuals with DS in our study had an increased risk of incident liver cancer and elevated mortality due to stomach, liver, and gallbladder cancers, although these risk estimates were based on few observations. Previous studies\textsuperscript{28,29} have reported fewer cancers at these sites, possibly because they did not include many individuals with DS who had reached the older ages at which these cancers tend to occur. In one study,\textsuperscript{30} an excess of gastric cancer was observed, based on 2 cases in males. Although our study population was identified through hospital discharge diagnoses, which might overestimate some cancer risks, such methods seem unlikely to result in an elevated risk of these relatively uncommon cancers, particularly in the face of somewhat reduced risks for all solid tumors combined. The excess risk of liver cancer may be attributable in part to infection with the hepatitis B virus,\textsuperscript{31} which also may be implicated in the elevated mortality from liver cirrhosis\textsuperscript{32} observed in this cohort. Among institutionalized and noninstitutionalized individuals, those with DS have a higher prevalence of chronic hepatitis B infection than those with mental retardation.\textsuperscript{33,34} Similarly, the increased stomach cancer mortality possibly could be related to chronic infection by Helicobacter pylori,\textsuperscript{35} a bacterium also linked to gastric and duodenal ulcers,\textsuperscript{36} which also occurred more frequently than expected in our mortality analysis. Infection with the hepatitis B virus and H pylori may be heightened by transmission within institutionalized settings\textsuperscript{17} and by the altered cellular and humoral immunity evident in individuals with DS.\textsuperscript{14,16}

The increased risk of testicular cancer in our study is consistent with the excess of testicular seminomas suggested in some clinical surveys of DS.\textsuperscript{38,39} Undescended testes, a risk factor for testicular cancer, is more common than expected in DS (relative risk, 37).\textsuperscript{40} However, in 2 comparative genomic hybridization studies, 63% to 90% of non-DS seminomatous germ cell tumors demonstrated a gain of 21q,\textsuperscript{41,42} suggesting that chromosome 21 gene expression might predispose to testicular cancer development independent of undescended testes. Risk of penile cancer was also increased in our study. Poor personal hygiene and infections such as human papilloma
virus are risk factors for this tumor, which has not previously been associated with DS.

Risk of solid tumors other than gastrointestinal and male genital tumors was somewhat reduced in our study population, as suggested by 2 other surveys of cancer in individuals with DS. Although it has been proposed that the slightly lower risk may be related to the increased expression of chromosome 21 tumor suppressor genes, it seems likely that decreased tobacco and alcohol use, early menopause, and other environmental and host factors associated with DS also contributed.

Individuals with DS have previously been reported to be at increased risk for diabetes mellitus, particularly type 1 diabetes mellitus, and the elevated diabetes mellitus mortality rate in the present study was also observed in another study. Age at onset of diabetes mellitus may be earlier among those with DS than in other populations. The autoimmune regulator gene (also known as APECED) on chromosome 21 may be related to familial aggregation of type 1 diabetes mellitus, but it did not seem to play a role in diabetes mellitus associated with DS in one study.

During a portion of the study, the ICD codes used to identify causes of mortality did not distinguish Alzheimer disease from other forms of dementia; thus, only the substantially elevated risk of dementia (which includes Alzheimer disease) is presented. In a previous study, individuals with DS also had elevated mortality ascribed to Alzheimer disease. Previous studies have indicated that Alzheimer disease or dementia is more common in individuals with DS than in those with other types of mental disability. The prevalence of dementia in persons with DS aged 50 to 59 years ranged from 42% to 55% in 2 studies and did not seem attributable to selective institutionalization. The amyloid A4 precursor protein, produced by the gene on chromosome 21, has been found to accumulate in the brains of patients with DS at much younger than expected ages. Inherited alterations in this protein also have been found in a small proportion of multiplex families with Alzheimer disease.

The increased mortality attributed to epilepsy in our study is in accord with the high prevalence of epilepsy (8%-17%) previously reported in adults with DS and with the elevated mortality attributed to epilepsy in a British study. Epilepsy has been noted more often in the subset of individuals with DS who have been diagnosed as having dementia or Alzheimer disease, a relationship also seen in the general population. A gene related to progressive myoclonus epilepsy (EPM1), a rare autosomal recessive disorder with early onset, is located on chromosome 21 and may contribute to the childhood epilepsy diagnoses also evident in those with DS.

The excess mortality from cardiovascular disease in our cohort has been frequently described in DS populations, but it may sometimes be a consequence of congenital heart malformations, which are coded separately under congenital anomalies in ICD-9. The 4- to 16-fold increased risks of other types of heart disease in our study may be related to unrecognized congenital heart defects and increased body mass index, lower physical activity, and a tendency toward diabetes mellitus among individuals with DS. In addition, the risk of coronary heart disease seems elevated in individuals who harbor particular infectious agents, including Chlamydia pneumoniae, and the greater risks of pneumonia, influenza, and other infections in those with DS may have contributed to the increased cardiovascular disease mortality. The elevated mortality from cerebrovascular disease in this cohort may be related in part to deposition of the amyloid protein produced by the chromosome 21 gene, a condition known as cerebral amyloid angiopathy, which is often complicated by cerebrovascular hemorrhage.

The substantially increased risk of mortality from congenital malformations in our study is in agreement with previous investigations, which have documented an elevated prevalence at birth or elevated mortality due to anomalies of the cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, urinary, male genital, and other systems. Deaths ascribed to DS alone, which are included with congenital anomalies under ICD-9 coding (but excluded in this study), were found in a Canadian study to be primarily due to pneumonia and congenital heart disease.

In summary, our record-linkage study of DS in cohorts from Sweden and Denmark revealed elevated risks of incident leukemia and (based on small numbers) testicular, penile, and liver cancers, as well as excess mortality ascribed to leukemia, stomach cancer, and numerous nonmalignant causes of death, including dementia or Alzheimer disease, epilepsy, ischemic heart disease, other heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, infectious diseases, respiratory diseases, and congenital anomalies. The precise magnitude of the risks to individuals with DS could not be estimated, as we included only events occurring more than 1 year subsequent to a hospital discharge. However, the increased risks of incident acute leukemia in this investigation were in agreement with estimates from previous population-based studies, whereas most of the excess causes of death observed in this investigation have been described in previous surveys and seem biologically plausible. Our findings differ somewhat from those of a US DS death certificate study, possibly because of differences in the source of the population (deaths only) and the methods of analysis. Because hospitalized Swedish and Danish patients with DS have been followed for only 10 years on average, further follow-up is needed to clarify cancer and mortality risks as the population ages. Chromosome 21 genes acting in conjunction with other genes or environmental exposures may modify disease risks among those with DS. In particular, the altered immunologic and other host factors may render those with DS more susceptible to environmental exposures such as infectious agents, including those prevalent in institutionalized populations. Down syndrome may represent a model of the interaction between candidate genes and exposures that may deepen our understanding of disease mechanisms in individuals affected and unaffected by DS.

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