Preventable Death Gap is Widening Between Urban and Rural Communities

Where you live really does impact your health, and it tends to be for the worse if you live in rural areas. The CDC recently presented data specific to excess deaths from cancer and other leading causes of death in rural communities in this Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. From 2003 to 2012, the overall death rate due to cancer decreased by 1.5 percent, though rates declined less in rural areas than in urban ones. Rural areas experience definite disparities due to a:

- Higher prevalence of tobacco-use
- Lack of access to cancer screening services
- Lack of follow-up on abnormal tests
- Lack of quality care for cancer patients
- Lack of cancer survival care

The charts below show just how extreme the difference is in terms of cancer deaths in rural and urban areas, both in terms of percentages by public health region and across the US as a whole.

[Charts showing cancer death rates by rural and urban areas]

Albeit staggering, states, tribes, territories, and the nation are taking strides to help reduce the preventable death rate due to cancer. Take the Cancer Moonshot, a nationwide program focused on increasing understanding of the entire continuum of cancer care, from prevention and early detection to treatments and cures. Thus far, several innovative activities have sprouted from this initiative to support the continuum of cancer care:
• The American Cancer Society and CDC are advancing efforts to promote HPV vaccination for cancer prevention, raising awareness of the importance of vaccination for youth ages 11 to 12. Increasing vaccination rates in rural areas, especially among individuals from high-income families in rural areas is crucial for reducing the urban rural divide. Research shows that although there isn’t a significant difference between vaccination rates in rural and urban areas overall, there is a significant difference when sociodemographic factors are considered. Specifically, research shows that girls from low-income households in rural areas are more likely than those from high-income households to initiate the vaccine. Future prevention efforts will need to be tailored to high-income rural households.
• A partnership with the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation is in place to bring high-quality care to cancer patients in rural and underserved areas using telemedicine to pair doctors at National Cancer Institute Designated Comprehensive Cancer Centers and academic medical centers with those in community hospitals and health delivery centers.
• The National Endowment for the Arts is designing a pilot project with state partners to help improve cancer survivorship through art in rural and urban settings.

You can discover other cancer focused initiatives in your state, tribe, or territory by visiting the cancer control consortium website for your area here.