

Unraveling the ties of altitude, oxygen and lung cancer

By George Johnson, New York Times

Epidemiologists have long been puzzled by a strange pattern in their data: People living at higher altitudes appear less likely to get lung cancer.

Associations like these can be notoriously misleading. Slice and dice the profusion of data, and there is no end to the coincidences that can arise.

A paper published last year in the journal PeerJ plumbed the question to new depths and arrived at an intriguing explanation. The higher you live, the thinner the air, so maybe oxygen is a cause of lung cancer.

Oxygen cannot compete with cigarettes, of course, but the study suggests that if everyone in the United States moved to the alpine heights of San Juan County, Colo. (population: 700), there would be 65,496 fewer cases of lung cancer each year.

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