

# Losing sense of smell can be fatal sign

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A poor sense of smell is also strongly linked to death from dementia ALAMY

Older patients should have their sense of smell tested to identify the risk of an early death, scientists suggested.

Adults in their seventies with a poor sense of smell were found by a Michigan State University study to be nearly 50 per cent more likely to die within a decade than peers with sharper noses.

Poor sense of smell was also strongly linked to death from dementia, Parkinson's disease and weight loss. It was modestly associated with cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure. The research adds to evidence suggesting that anosmia — a loss of the sense of smell, either total or partial — can provide an early warning of ill health.

The statistics were driven by the patients who had been the healthiest at the outset of the 13-year study, which was published yesterday in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Among this group, a poor sense of smell was associated with a 62 per cent higher risk of death within a decade.

Honglei Chen, an epidemiologist who led the study, said: “In older adults impaired sense of smell has broader implications of health beyond what we have already known.

“Incorporating a sense of smell screening in routine doctor visits might be a good idea.”

Robert Howard of UCL, who was not involved in the new study, said: “Most of the increased mortality risk could not be explained by associations with specific illnesses such as cancer or cardiovascular disorders.

“This raises the interesting possibility that loss of smell may be a marker of generalised ageing and should be taken seriously by older people and their doctors.”

A poor sense of smell is estimated to affect about a quarter of older adults. Unlike deafness or poor eyesight, however, it often goes undetected. Previous research had suggested that it is among the earliest symptoms of degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s.

In the latest study scientists reviewed data from nearly 2,300 American subjects aged between 71 and 82 years old, over a 13-year period. The participants completed a smell test of 12 odours that are common in everyday life.

Researchers then classified them as having a good, moderate or poor sense of smell. Compared with older adults with a good sense of smell, those with poor smell were at a 46 per cent higher risk of dying within the next decade.

Moreover, the subjects who were healthiest at the outset were found to be largely responsible for the higher risk.

Kevin McConway, emeritus professor of applied statistics at the Open University, said: “One possibility is that poor sense of smell is a sign, perhaps an early sign, of some underlying illness and that this illness is what leads to increased mortality.

“Another is that poor sense of smell might itself lead to illness, perhaps because poor smell affects how food tastes, and therefore might contribute to poor nutrition which could lead to bad health.

“Most likely, both of these possibilities, and others, could be in play.”

