

Prevention and detection of cancer

How can we prevent or decrease the risk of cancer? By Dr Akhil Chopra

all of us can decrease the risk of developing cancer if we take charge over our health and adopt healthy practices in daily living.

How to avoid cancer

Numerous scientifically conducted studies have shown that smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol can cause people to get certain types of cancer like lung as well as head and neck cancers. These cancers can be prevented by avoiding or giving up on tobacco and reducing alcohol intake. Cigarettes, cigars, pipes and even smokeless tobacco causes cancer. If you have a smoking habit right now, you should quit.

Our diet (what we eat) is linked to some types of cancer, although the exact reasons are not clear. Eat a lot of fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains like pasta and bread, and cutting down on high fat foods is recommended. (See additional recommendations next page.)

There are tests, called health-screening examinations, that adults should have every year to detect any form of diseases early. Cancer is much easier to treat if it is detected early.

According to the National Cancer Institute in the United States, as much as 80 per cent of all cancers are due to identified factors, thus are potentially preventable. (It is estimated that only five to 10 per cent of all cancer cases are inherited.) Thirty per cent are due to tobacco use and as much as 35 to 50 per cent are due to foods. Cancer cannot be explained by heredity alone even if the evidence indicates that genetics is a factor in the development of cancer. Behavioural factors such as cigarette smoking, dietary choices and physical activity modify the risk of

cancer at all stages of its development. The introduction of healthy diet and exercise practices at any time from childhood to old age can promote health and reduce cancer risk.

Stress can also lead to unhealthy and potentially cancer-causing habits, which can contribute to an increased risk of developing cancer. There are things you can do to control these and other risk factors.

Detection of cancer

The best defense against cancer is often recognising symptoms early and detecting the disease before it is able to progress. Knowing what tools are available is often a large part of the battle.

Unfortunately, many types of cancer don't display any obvious symptoms or cause pain until well advanced. Because early-stage cancer symptoms tend to be subtle, they are often mistaken for signs of other, less-threatening diseases.

Some symptoms are specific to certain types of cancer, such as difficult urination for prostate cancer or flu-like symptoms for acute leukemias. Don't hesitate to discuss unusual symptoms with your doctor. Diagnostic tests are available for most common cancers. If diagnosed early, your chances of surviving cancer are greatly increased.

Tips for women

To help find breast cancer early, all women 40 years and older should have a mammogram (an X-ray of your breasts) every one to two years with or without a clinical breast exam. If you are at high risk for breast cancer, such as a history of breast cancer in your family, your doctor

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Some recommendations to prevent cancer include:

- Eat a variety of healthful foods, with an emphasis on plant sources.
- Eat foods as close to their natural state as possible.
- Avoid heavily processed foods such as canned foods.
- Eat more servings of a variety of vegetables and fruits each day and less meat.
- Choose whole grains in preference to processed (refined) grains and sugars.
- Limit consumption of red meats, especially those high in fat and processed.
- Choose foods that are low in cholesterol.
- Avoid pesticides and products that have cancer-causing ingredients.
- Adopt a physically active lifestyle. Adults should engage in at least moderate activity for 30 minutes or more on five or more days of the week; 45 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous activity on five or more days per week may further enhance reductions in the risk of breast and colon cancer. Children and adolescents should engage in at least 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity at least five days per week.
- Balance caloric intake with physical activity.
- Lose weight if currently overweight or obese.
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, limit consumption.
- Reduce or cut out tobacco use.
- Deal with stress and depression before allowing it to overtake you.



However, the PSA level can also be high because of less serious causes, such as infection.

What about detecting colorectal cancer?

Most colorectal cancers begin as a polyp. At first, a polyp is a small, harmless growth in the wall of the colon. However, as a polyp gets larger, it can develop into a cancer that grows and spreads. See your doctor if you have any of the following warning signs:

- Bleeding from your rectum
- Blood in your stool or in the toilet after you have a bowel movement
- A prolonged change in the consistency of your stool (such as diarrhoea) or constipation last several weeks
- Cramping or pain in your lower stomach
- A feeling of discomfort or an urge to have a bowel movement when there is no need to have one
- Unintended weight loss

In today's troubled economy, saving money is a hot topic. No matter what gets cut from your budget, making healthy choices to prevent cancer should be on the list. All of us can take steps toward reducing our risks for certain cancers. So, take charge of your life! ♥

Dr Akhil Chopra is a consultant oncologist at the Johns Hopkins Singapore IMC. He is American board certified in Internal Medicine as well as in Haematology and Medical oncology. Dr Chopra specialises in malignant haematology including lymphomas and B-cell malignancies as well as in thoracic and gastrointestinal malignancies.

This article was written from the author's opinion and does not reflect those of Johns Hopkins Singapore International Medical Center.

7 warning signs

Here are the seven warning signs of cancer:

- Changes in bowel or bladder habits
- A sore that does not heal
- Unusual bleeding or discharge
- Indigestion or difficulty swallowing
- An obvious change in a wart or mole
- A nagging cough or hoarseness
- Thickening or lump in the breast or any other part of the body



may want you to have mammograms more often or start having them sooner.

To help find cervical cancer early, have Pap smear test at least every three years. During a Pap test, your doctor takes a sample of cells from your cervix (the outer end of the uterus), to be tested. Your doctor may also collect cells from your cervix during a Pap test to be tested for the human papilloma virus or HPV. There are 13 types of HPV that have been linked to cervical cancer, and this test can detect abnormal cells before cancer forms.

Tips for men

To help find prostate cancer early, talk to your doctor about your risk. Factors such as family

history, age and race play a part in the risk of prostate cancer.

If you decide to have screening, your doctor may examine your prostate by putting a gloved, lubricated finger a few inches into your rectum to feel your prostate gland. This is called a digital rectal exam. A normal prostate feels firm and rubbery. If there are hard spots on the prostate, your doctor may suggest additional testing to check for prostate cancer.

Another way to screen for prostate cancer is with a blood test called the PSA test. PSA is short for prostate-specific antigen. Men who have prostate cancer may have a higher level of PSA in their blood.