Most cancers are caused by a combination of risk factors, including:

- **Genetic factors** you inherit from your biological parents
- **Environmental factors**, like sunlight and air pollution
- **Personal habits**, like smoking
- **Food you eat and medicine you take**

While it might seem like genetics is the biggest factor in cancer, there is evidence to suggest that only between 5 to 10 percent of cancers are hereditary.

That means that your lifestyle choices and your environment are very important in determining our overall risk for cancer.

Considering that, there are steps you can take in your everyday life to reduce your risk of cancer. For example: avoiding or quitting smoking will reduce your risk for lung cancer and protecting your skin from the sun will reduce your chance of developing skin cancer.
Preventing Cancer is a Life-long Journey

Just like staying physically and mentally fit, preventing cancer is something that takes daily work starting at birth. Luckily, a lot of cancer-preventing habits are ones we already try to follow. Depending on your stage of life, you’ll want to focus on different measures to maximize your cancer prevention efforts.

Prenatal and Early Childhood

From the womb to age 7, parents can help limit children’s exposure to carcinogens and can encourage behaviors that may lower a child’s risk of cancer.

Expectant parents can help start your baby on the right track to cancer prevention during pregnancy by:

- Getting enough folic acid
- Avoiding alcohol and tobacco consumption
- Reducing exposure to traffic-related air pollution
- Avoiding exposure to carcinogenic chemicals
- Limiting the amount of radiation exposure during medical tests
- Learning about your family’s history of exposure to diethylstilbestrol (DES)

Parents of infants, toddlers, and young children can continue cancer prevention by:

- Breastfeeding
- Promoting enough physical activity
- Ensuring safe, nurturing, and stable relationships and environments
Adolescence

For children aged 8 to 18, establishing good habits and preventing bad ones early are the keys to cancer prevention. Setting up adolescents with the right habits can also have other benefits, such as promoting fitness and overall health.

Key Protective Habits:
- Eating healthy food in healthy portions
- Exercising regularly

Habits to Avoid:
- Excessive sunbathing or use of a tanning bed
- Smoking and other tobacco use
- Underage alcohol consumption

As a parent, it is also important to ensure that your adolescent is protected by the three-dose human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine series and avoids both unnecessary radiation during medical imaging procedures and exposure to certain carcinogenic chemicals that may be in their environment.

Cancer Among Youth Support Group(s):

Stupid Cancer
40 Worth Street, Suite 808
New York, NY 10013
877-735-4673
www.stupidcancer.org
contact@stupidcancer.org
Adulthood

To prevent cancer as an adult, it is important to carry through many of the good habits established in adolescence and continue to avoid the bad ones. Even if you have not established good habits by this time, adults—even those in midlife (45-65 years old)—can benefit from adopting good habits now. That means:

- Eat healthy
- Exercise regularly and maintain a healthy weight
- Get enough sleep
- Seek regular, appropriate medical care
- Avoid smoking and secondhand smoke
- Limit alcohol consumption
- Protect your skin
- Avoid exposure to certain carcinogenic chemicals
- Limit radiation dose during medical imaging procedures
- Get tested for Hepatitis C

Making and keeping good habits can be more important than many realize.

When you compare current smokers to nonsmokers, current smokers are 25 times more likely to die from lung cancer. In fact, smoking has been shown to cause between 80 to 90 percent of lung cancer deaths. Smoking can also cause over a dozen other cancers, including cancers of the mouth and throat, esophagus, colon, pancreas, kidney, and trachea.1,2 People exposed to secondhand smoke are also at an increased risk for cancers, particularly lung cancer, because secondhand smoke has higher concentrations of many cancer-causing chemicals than smoke inhaled by smokers.3

While lung cancer may be the leading cause of cancer death, skin cancer is the most common cancer in the US. The most important environmental factor leading to skin cancer is exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays. You’re exposed to these rays every time you are in the sun or laying in a tanning bed. But, you can protect your skin from these harmful rays by avoiding tanning beds and using sunscreen, wearing sun-protective clothing, and finding shade when you are outdoors.
Unlike avoiding smoking and the sun, limiting your alcohol intake and maintaining a healthy weight have more generalized benefits and protect against a wide range of cancers. Both habits protect against breast cancer and colorectal cancer. Conversely, drinking alcohol regularly increases your risk for mouth, larynx (voice box), and throat cancers as well as cancers of the esophagus, rectum, and liver. Additionally, being overweight (defined as having a BMI over 25) is linked to an increased risk of prostate and endometrial (uterine) cancers.

Getting tested for Hepatitis C may not seem like an important cancer-preventing behavior, but chronic Hepatitis C can lead to serious liver problems, up to and including liver cancer. The CDC recommends that anyone who was born between 1945 and 1965 get tested for Hepatitis C.

Screenings

It is also important to introduce regular screenings for cancer into your routine. If you do develop cancer, early detection is key to giving yourself the best chance at a good outcome. Be sure to get screenings as frequently as your doctor recommends.

Important screenings to remember include:

- BREAST CANCER
- CERVICAL CANCER
- COLORECTAL CANCER
- LUNG CANCER

For some cancers, such as breast cancer and skin cancer, you can even do self-exams between screenings.
References


Additional Reading

smokefree.gov
cdc.gov/cancer/dcpc/prevention/lifetime.htm
cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/patient-prevention-overview-pdq