



Cutting Your Cancer Risk

Did you know that you can reduce your risk of certain cancers by changing your lifestyle? Research has shown that simple lifestyle changes could make a dramatic difference. Here's what all of us can do to cut the risk.

Three strikes: smoking, drinking, and obesity

Smoking, drinking, and obesity are the three biggest modifiable risk factors affecting people in North America. Here are some strategies to help you fight the battle against cancer on these three fronts.

Smoking

Lighting up may increase your risk of developing a number of cancers, including lung, bladder, kidney, colorectal, pancreatic, breast, among others. Even if you are just an occasional smoker, you may still be significantly increasing your risk of developing cancer.

Here are some tips for butting out:

- Set a quit date and stick to it.
- Tell others about your plan. If they know you are trying to quit, friends who smoke may be less likely to offer you a cigarette or invite you on a smoke break.
- Learn your smoking triggers, then eliminate, reduce, or change those smoking-related routines, such as an after-work drink or coffee breaks, to weaken the association.
- Talk to your pharmacist or doctor about medications that can help you quit.

Drinking

For many people, drinking in moderation (2 drinks per day for men or 1 drink per day for women) isn't considered a problem, but excessive drinking can increase your risk of head and neck, esophageal, liver, breast, and colorectal cancers.

Here's how to keep your alcohol consumption under control:

- Talk to your doctor about whether alcohol is appropriate for you, given your existing risk factors for cancer, medications you may be taking, and other factors.
- At parties, alternate between alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages to stay hydrated and limit the total amount of alcohol you consume.
- Know what makes a serving. One drink is defined as 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits, which are about 40% alcohol.
- Avoid binge drinking – 4 or more drinks for women and 5 or more drinks for men, consumed in about 2 hours.
- Recognize the signs of problem drinking. These include drinking in secret, episodes of blacking out, feeling a "need" to drink, and requiring increasing amounts of alcohol to feel the effects of alcohol. If you experience these signs, talk to your doctor.

Overweight and obesity

If you are overweight or obese, you are carrying more than just extra pounds – you're also carrying an increased risk of developing a number of different cancers, including breast, endometrium, gallbladder, and ovarian cancer for women, and colorectal and prostate cancer for men. In addition to increasing your risk, the excess weight may also make it more difficult to screen for some cancers, increasing the chance that they may spread before being caught.

Here are some tips for keeping your weight under control:

- Be familiar with what appropriate serving sizes look like. Measure out portions at first and from time to time. If your servings are too large, you may inadvertently be consuming extra calories.
- Swap full-fat meat and dairy products for lower-fat alternatives. If the taste of low-fat products takes some getting used to, gradually introduce them into your diet.
- Allow yourself the occasional indulgence. If you deprive yourself all the time, you may be more tempted to binge. But keep treats small.
- Exercise! If you don't have time for a long workout, break up your exercise into shorter sessions throughout the day. Accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity over the course of the week. You can do many different types of activity, from brisk walking to jogging to cycling. The more active you are, the more health benefits you'll see.

More things you can do to cut your cancer risk

Aside from your weight, smoking, and drinking, there are other lifestyle factors that can increase your risk of developing cancer. Here are some other ones that are likely to affect your health here in North America:

- low intake of fruits and vegetables
- "unsafe" sex
- air pollution

Just as with the three main factors, there are ways you can reduce the risk posed by these factors as well. Here are some tips.

Eat healthy

- Fill half of your plate with fruits and vegetables at each meal (e.g., green leafy veggies, broccoli, carrots, blueberries), as recommended by Canada's Food Guide. Keep fresh fruit and veggies washed, cut, and ready to eat.
- Fill one quarter of your plate with whole grain foods (oats, quinoa, brown rice) and another quarter with protein-rich foods (tofu, nuts, legumes).
- Reduce the amount of red and processed meat that you consume.
- Start meals off with a salad, or top your cereal with fresh fruit.
- Keep frozen fruits and veggies on hand. Vegetables maintain their nutrient content through the commercial freezing process and can easily be incorporated into a pasta or stir-fry. Fruits can be a great addition to milk, juice, or yogurt for a quick smoothie.
- You've probably heard this before, but it's worth repeating: stay away from foods that are high in salt and sugar, like sugary drinks, fast foods, and processed foods! Just remember – lots of fruit, veggies, and fibre, very little sugar, salt, and fat!

Practice "safe" sex

- Limit your number of sexual partners, and use condoms when you have sex.
- Learn how to use condoms properly. They are the only form of contraception that, when used properly, can decrease your risk of sexually transmitted infections.
- Use a water-based lubricant. Oil-based lubricants can cause condoms to break down.
- For women, have Pap smears as recommended by your doctor in order to check for early signs of cervical cancer.
- Speak to your doctor about receiving vaccines against certain viral infections:
 - HPV (human papillomavirus) – this virus has been linked to cervical cancer.
 - Hepatitis B – this virus has been linked to liver cancer.

Reduce your exposure to air pollution

- Check daily air quality levels in your area before spending time outside. Limit your time outdoors during smog advisories, particularly if you have a respiratory condition.
- Make your home and car smoke-free.
- Prevent fumes from lingering in your living space by regularly checking exhaust systems and flues for home furnaces, fireplaces, hot water heaters, and other possible sources of indoor pollutants.
- Make sure air filters in your home are cleaned or replaced as often as recommended.

Do your part to reduce air pollution: when possible, walk, take public transit, or ride a bike instead of driving your car.

Take control of your cancer risk

Knowing which lifestyle factors have an impact on cancer risk worldwide is important, but how can you tell which factors actually affect *your* life?

You can start by looking at the list of modifiable risk factors and asking yourself how you measure up. Remember, these are risk factors you can control. While you should feel good about the positive lifestyle decisions you've made, you also know when you are doing something that isn't good for your health. It's important to be honest with yourself.

Is your weight higher than it should be? Do you know your body mass index (BMI)? Do you smoke even the occasional cigarette? Do you exercise regularly? Do you know the difference between moderate alcohol intake and problem drinking?

If you're less than totally honest with yourself, you're not alone. One survey showed that only 39% of obese adults described themselves as obese. If you are only dealing with a couple of extra pounds right now, it might not be a problem. But adding a pound or two every year with the promise to "take it off in the summer" can add up over time, and that extra weight may eventually add up to a big health problem.

If you only smoke the occasional cigarette, you may be telling yourself it doesn't carry the same health risks as being a regular smoker. But "social" smokers should beware. Even light smoking (5 or fewer cigarettes per day) can carry a hefty health toll, increasing your risk of dying from lung cancer and other ailments.

But acknowledging you could improve in certain areas and actually doing something about it are two different things. After all, why do today what you can put off until tomorrow? Making different lifestyle decisions can be very difficult. These are habits that have developed over years and understanding their effect on your chances of developing cancer and changing them isn't always easy.

If you're confused about how these risk factors may affect you, ask your doctor.

The next time your doctor asks you questions about your lifestyle – for example, if you smoke or if you exercise regularly – be honest. Admitting your habits aren't always the healthiest can feel embarrassing, but your doctor is there to help, not judge. When it comes to getting help to make the changes you need to cut your cancer risk, your doctor is a valuable resource, but they can only help you make those changes if you tell them what areas you need help with. There's no health benefit to sticking your head in the sand.

Reducing cancer's death toll through prevention

Ever heard the saying "prevention is the best medicine"? While there are only a few cancers that have a single known cause, researchers have identified a number of factors that may contribute to the risk of developing cancer and affect its prognosis.

Besides risk factors that are beyond our control, such as family history, there are modifiable risk factors that we do have control over. So take charge by making changes in any or all of these areas to lower the risk of developing and dying from cancer.

Some of the most frequently studied known or suspected risk factors are:

- overweight and obesity
- low fruit and vegetable intake
- physical inactivity
- smoking
- alcohol use
- unsafe sex
- urban air pollution
- smoke from coal or wood stoves

Among these risk factors, smoking, alcohol, and overweight and obesity were found to be the most important lifestyle factors that contribute to the development of cancer, especially in high-income regions such as North America.

Cancer is the leading cause of death in Canada and is responsible for 30% of all deaths in the country. Due to the growing and aging population, the number of cancer deaths is expected to continue to increase. There are effective screening methods available for only a few cancers (and prognosis can be dependent on catching cancer early, before it spreads), so the effectiveness of treatment for many cancers may be limited. According to the Canadian Cancer Society, nearly 1 out of 4 Canadians is expected to die from cancer. This is why the best way to reduce these deaths is to prevent the cancers from developing in the first place by targeting modifiable risk factors. This is where you can be in control.

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