

Cancer Basics: Prevention and Treatment

Key Points

- Cancer is now the leading cause of death in the United States for persons below the age of 85.
- Cancer occurs when cells do not grow normally.
- Ways to reduce your risk for cancer include: making lifestyle improvements, getting regular cancer screenings, and in special cases, using chemopreventive agents.
- Treatment options for cancer include: surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy through traditional treatment regimens or promising clinical trials for newly discovered treatments.

1. What is cancer?

Cancer begins in the body's cells, which are the building blocks for tissues and organs of the body. Normally, cells grow and divide to form new cells in the body. In cancer cases, this process goes wrong, and new cells form when the body does not need them. These extra cells form a mass of tissue called a **tumor**.

- **Benign tumors** are not cancer and are rarely life-threatening.
- **Malignant tumors** are cancer and may be life-threatening.

Cells from malignant tumors can break away from the original tumor and spread to other parts of the body. This spread is called **metastasis**.

2. Is cancer a problem in the United States?

Yes. Cancer is now the leading cause of death for people below the age of 85 in the United States. Every year, more than a million people are diagnosed with cancer.

3. How can I reduce my risk of getting cancer?

Prevention and early detection techniques can reduce the chances of cancer occurring and prevent a number of cancer deaths. There are a number of ways to **improve your lifestyle** that have been shown to reduce your risk of getting cancer. These lifestyle changes include:

- Avoiding tobacco and excessive alcohol use.
- Increasing physical activity and achieving a healthy weight.
- Improving nutrition to eat fewer high fat foods and eat more fruits and vegetables.
- Avoiding a lot of sun exposure without sunscreen or protective clothing.

Everyone should get regular **screenings** for cancer, including people who have no symptoms. Screenings can help healthcare professionals find and treat some types of cancer early. In the United States, half of all cancer cases can be prevented or detected earlier by screenings. Examples of screenings include:

- Colorectal screenings for colon or rectal cancer
- Mammograms for breast cancer
- Pap tests for cervical cancer
- Comprehensive skin exams for melanoma and other forms of skin cancer

You may also use chemoprevention agents to reduce your risk. According to the National Cancer Institute, **chemoprevention** is the use of drugs, vitamins, or other agents to reduce the risk of developing, or to delay the development or recurrence of cancer.

4. How can cancer be treated?

There are many options available to treat cancer. The best treatment option(s) to use often depends on the type of cancer, the stage of the disease, and the patient's age and general health.

- **Surgery** is used to remove the tumor and some of the tissue around it. Removing the nearby tissue may help prevent the cancer from growing back.
- **Radiation therapy** uses high energy rays to kill cancer cells. There are several types of radiation therapy available.
- **Chemotherapy** uses drugs that kill cancer cells. Patients are given drugs by vein or by mouth. The drugs enter the bloodstream and work on cancer cells all over the body.
- **Clinical trials** provide patients with access to promising treatments that may involve new treatments or combinations of existing treatments that have not been approved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA). People who join clinical trials may be among the first to benefit if a new approach turns out to be effective. As with any treatment, risks may be associated with clinical trials that administer treatments.

It is important to **talk to your doctor** about what treatment option(s) are right for you and to work with your doctor to make decisions. Your doctor can describe your treatment choices and the expected results.

Related Resources:

The National Cancer Institute
Telephone: 1-800-4-CANCER
Web site: www.cancer.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Telephone: 1-800-311-3435
Web site: www.cdc.gov

Coalitions for Cancer Cooperative Groups, Inc.
Telephone: 1-877-520-4457
Web site: www.cancertrialshelp.org

C-Change
1776 Eye Street, N.W., Suite 900
Washington, DC 20006
Phone: (800) 830-1827
Fax: (202) 756-1512
Web site: www.c-changetogether.org

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