How to Reduce the Odds of Getting Cancer

‘There are steps you can take that will absolutely cut your risk,’ says Fred Hutch’s Anne McTiernan, MD, PhD, who contributed to a new report on diet, nutrition, physical activity and cancer

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Cancer is a preventable disease.

Your parents may have had the disease, or the genetic tests on your mailed-in saliva may have come back positive, but you are not necessarily fated to develop cancer. In fact, more than four in five people with cancer have no known genetic predisposition for cancer.

Something else causes most cancers, and that something can often be reversed. This is not to say that all cancers can be stopped before they start — or to blame people for “causing” their cancer — but there are steps you can take that will absolutely cut your risk.

A new report by the World Cancer Research Fund and the American Institute for Cancer Research sums it up: You can significantly reduce your risk for many cancers by keeping to a normal weight, being physically active, minimizing alcohol intake, and eating a diet that’s high in vegetables and fruits and low in sugar and other processed foods.

Many of the findings cited in this report have been published but the authors take it a step further: gathering together an overwhelming amount of evidence, then providing guidelines for lifestyle changes to reduce cancer risk.

This moves the information from the theoretical to the practical. And it’s important to take heed.

The range of cancers affected by lifestyle factors like diet, alcohol use and exercise is surprisingly high, and most of the common cancers are included.

This latest report found strong evidence that being overweight or obese increased the risk for cancers of the colon, rectum, breast (after menopause), esophagus, mouth, throat, stomach, pancreas, gallbladder, liver, ovary, endometrium, prostate (advanced) and kidney.

There was also strong evidence of a link between increased alcohol intake and elevated risks for

cancers of the mouth, throat, esophagus, stomach, liver, colon, rectum and breast. And strong evidence that physical activity reduces risk for cancers of the colon, breast and endometrium. The report also found what it called “suggestive evidence” that it reduces risk for several other cancers.

Diet and other lifestyle factors are some of the “environmental” causes of cancer. And we know that environment is important in this disease because the rates of many cancers have increased over the last century following major shifts in people’s lifestyles and exposure to carcinogens.

Genetics alone can’t explain away these trends in cancer occurrence. The population gene pool can’t change this fast, but our exposure to carcinogens has changed over a short period of time.

We need governmental and corporate help to reduce exposures to the cancer-causing chemicals we encounter in our daily lives (like, say, air pollution or asbestos), but we don’t need anybody’s permission or assistance to take control of our own risk by changing our lifestyle.

Admittedly, that can be challenging. But the benefits are high and the risks are low.

- The amount of physical activity recommended — 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity exercise — can be accomplished with a daily 30-minute walk. You do not need to be an athlete. You don’t even need to buy expensive shoes.
- Keeping alcohol intake to one drink or less per day saves money as well as having health benefits.
- Reducing sugar intake is as simple as reaching for a glass of water or a nonsweetened drink and reserving desserts and sweets for special occasions. They’ll taste even better.
- And making a commitment to eat real food — vegetables, fruit, dairy products, legumes — will go a long way to reducing risk for several cancers as well as maintaining weight in a healthy range. Peas and beans will keep you lean.

Over the past decades, many of our efforts to control cancer have focused mainly on finding “The Cure.” And yes, developing new, effective treatments is clearly critical for fighting cancer.

But focusing only on treatment is like fighting the front edge of a forest fire with high-tech gadgets while someone continues to light matches on the back end.

Cancer prevention needs to become mainstream for individuals, health organizations, researchers and society. Lifestyle changes need to be a key component of cancer prevention and to reducing the burden of cancer.

You truly can reduce your odds of getting cancer. You can even bet your life on it.

Anne McTiernan, MD, PhD, is a cancer prevention researcher in the Public Health Sciences Division at Fred Hutch. Her research focuses on identifying ways to prevent new or recurrent cancer with a particular focus on weight control, physical activity and chemoprevention. She is author of Starved: A Nutrition Doctor's Journey from Empty to Full (Central Recovery Press, 2016). The views expressed in commentaries belong to the author and may not necessarily reflect the views of Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

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