Survey Finds Alarming Gaps in Americans' Knowledge of Major Cancer Risk Factors

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Fewer than half of Americans recognize that drinking alcohol, diets high in red meat, diets low in vegetables, fruits and fiber and insufficient physical activity all have a clear link to cancer development, according to the American Institute for Cancer Research's (AICR) ninth Cancer Risk Awareness Survey. Awareness of other established cancer risk factors like obesity and processed meat is still alarmingly low, but has risen above 50% for the first time since AICR began the survey in 2001.

"There is an enormous opportunity to prevent future cancer cases," says Nigel Brockton, PhD, vice president of research at AICR. "Many people believe that pesticides or air pollution are the major factors in cancer risk, but modifiable lifestyle factors play a bigger role. Diet, activity, body weight and alcohol are the largest drivers of cancer risk and are under our control."

Overweight and Obesity is a Growing Public Health Crisis

The AICR survey finds that only 53% of Americans are aware that having overweight and obesity increases their cancer risk. The latest figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveal that over 70% of Americans have overweight or obesity. Overweight and obesity increase the risk of 12 types of cancer; six of these cancers have seen a rapid rise in diagnoses and are increasing with each successive younger age group. Aside from not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight is the most important way to protect against cancer.

"The lack of awareness about obesity's link to cancer is extremely concerning, especially because we are seeing an alarming increase in obesity-related cancers in younger adults," says Brockton. "We have to increase awareness around this growing public health crisis."

Awareness is also low for other common and important cancer risk factors. Alcohol increases the risk of six types of cancer: mouth, pharynx, and larynx, esophageal, breast, liver, stomach and colorectal. Less than half of Americans, however, know that drinking alcohol is a cancer risk factor.

“The first step towards solving a problem is recognizing that it exists; that is why awareness of cancer risk factors is so important,” says Brockton. “As much as we think we might have heard all of this before, clearly the messages have not been getting through.”

New Interactive Tool to Reduce Cancer Risk

The 2019 Cancer Risk Awareness Survey offers important insights and AICR is urging Americans to check in with their health this Cancer Prevention Month using AICR’s new online tool, Cancer Health Check. The tool combines AICR’s latest research and 10 Cancer Prevention Recommendations so that people can assess their lifestyle choices and learn how to live healthier lives.

Cancer Health Check prompts people to answer simple questions about their lifestyle habits and gives instant feedback about how well they meet the evidence-based recommendations or how they might make changes to follow the recommendations more closely.

“Cancer prevention is more important than ever. One in four people will develop cancer in their life and we know that about 40% of cancers are preventable,” says Sheena Patel Swanner, Director of Nutrition Programs at AICR. “Eating a plant-based diet, staying at a healthy weight and being active can reduce your chances of developing cancer. We really want to communicate the importance of a healthy lifestyle during Cancer Prevention Month.”

To view the full results of the 2019 Cancer Risk Awareness Survey, click here. To take the Cancer Health Check, visit cancerhealthcheck.org.

Data for the 2019 Cancer Risk Awareness Survey was collected in September 2019. The SSRS Omnibus sample is designed to represent the adult U.S. population (including Hawaii and Alaska). The survey included 1,009 respondents aged 18 and older who were telephoned at random. Margin of error: +/-3%. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish.

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