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Preventing Cancer -- Tips to Lower Your Risk

According to the National Institutes of Health: Doctors cannot always explain why one person gets cancer and another does not. However, scientists have studied general patterns of cancer in the population to learn what may increase our chance of developing cancer.

Anything that increases a person's chance of developing a disease is called a **risk factor**; anything that decreases a person's chance of developing a disease is called a **protective factor**. Some of the risk factors for cancer can be avoided, but many cannot. For example, although you can choose to quit smoking, you cannot choose which genes you have inherited from your parents. Both smoking and inheriting specific genes could be considered risk factors for certain kinds of cancer, but only smoking can be avoided. Prevention means avoiding the risk factors and increasing the protective factors that can be controlled so that the chance of developing cancer decreases.

Although many risk factors can be avoided, it is important to keep in mind that avoiding risk factors does not guarantee that you will not get cancer. Also, most people with a particular risk factor for cancer do not actually get the disease. Some people are more sensitive than others to factors that can cause cancer. Talk to your doctor about methods of preventing cancer that might be effective for you.

The tips below are taken from the NIH web-page fact sheets on each disease, and have been modified to include facts most relevant to seniors:

Breast Cancer

There are a number of prevention strategies that may help reduce a woman's risk of developing breast cancer:

- Studies show that in populations that consume a high-fat diet, women are more likely to die of breast cancer than women in populations that consume a low-fat diet. However, it is not known if a diet low in fat will prevent breast cancer.

- Eating a diet rich in beta-carotene may decrease the risk of breast cancer.
- Exercise may contribute to a decreased breast cancer risk
- Postmenopausal weight gain, especially after natural menopause and/or after age 60, may increase breast cancer risk.
- Drinking alcohol may be linked to increased breast cancer risk. The more alcohol a woman drinks, the more the risk of breast cancer may increase, compared to a woman who drinks no alcohol. In addition, a diet rich in beta-carotene, folate, and vitamins A and C may reverse the higher risk of breast cancer linked to alcohol use.
- Performing monthly breast self-exams, having professional breast exams every year, and having annual mammograms help ensure that, if cancer develops, it will be caught at its earliest, most curable stage.

Cervical Cancer

- Receiving regular gynecological exams and Pap tests help to prevent cervical cancer. Abnormal changes in the cervix can be detected by the Pap test and treated before cancer develops.
- Women who do not regularly have Pap tests have an increased risk of cervical cancer.
- After age 65 to 70, women who have received regular screening with normal results three times in a row typically can discontinue having Pap tests.
- Women over 65 who have other risks for cervical cancer (such as HIV or immune system disorders) or a history of high-grade lesions should continue to have regular Pap tests.

Colorectal Cancer

- Diet appears to be associated with colorectal cancer risk.
- Among populations that consume a diet high in fat, protein, calories, alcohol, and meat (both red and white) and low in calcium and folate, colorectal cancer is more likely to develop than among populations that consume a low-fat, high-fiber diet.
- A diet low in vitamin D may also increase the risk of colorectal cancer.
- A diet high in saturated fat combined with a sedentary lifestyle may increase the risk of colorectal cancer.

- There is also evidence that smoking cigarettes may be associated with an increased risk of colorectal cancer.

Lung Cancer

- Studies show that smoking tobacco products in any form is the major cause of lung cancer.
- People who stop smoking and never start again lower their risk of developing lung cancer or of having lung cancer recur (come back).
- Second-hand tobacco smoke also causes lung cancer. This is smoke that comes from a burning cigarette or other tobacco product, or smoke that is exhaled by smokers. People who inhale second-hand smoke are exposed to the same cancer-causing agents as smokers, although in weaker amounts.
- There are other causes of lung cancer in the environment, but their effect on lung cancer rates is small compared to the effect of cigarette smoking.
- Studies show that a diet rich in fruit, and possibly vegetables, may help lower the risk of lung cancer.
- Heavy alcohol drinking may increase the risk of lung cancer.
- Studies show that people who are physically active may have a lower risk of lung cancer than those who are not, even after taking cigarette smoking into account.

Oral Cancer

- Tobacco use (cigarettes, pipes, cigars, and smokeless tobacco) is responsible for most cases of oral cancer.
- Alcohol, particularly beer and hard liquor, are associated with an increased risk of developing oral cancer.
- The risk of developing oral cancer is higher in people who use both tobacco and alcohol.
- Avoiding or stopping the use of tobacco decreases the risk of oral cancer.
- It is not known if stopping the use of alcohol decreases the risk of oral cancer.

Ovarian Cancer

- Hormone replacement therapy, also called hormone therapy, may be associated with an increased risk of ovarian cancer in postmenopausal women.

Prostate Cancer

- The effect of diet on prostate cancer risk is under study. A diet high in fat, especially animal fat, may be associated with an increased risk of prostate cancer.
- More studies are needed to determine if a low-fat diet with more fruits and vegetables helps prevent prostate cancer.

Skin Cancer

- Studies have suggested that reducing exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation decreases the incidence of nonmelanoma skin cancer. This includes both exposure to the sun and exposure to UV rays from tanning booths and sunlamps.
- Sun exposure can be reduced by changing patterns of outdoor activities to reduce time of exposure to high-intensity UV radiation (the sun is strongest from 11 am to 3 pm), wearing protective clothing (such as long sleeves and hats) when exposed to sunlight, and by using adequate amounts of sufficiently protective sunscreen.
- Tanning booths and sunlamps should be avoided.

For more information review the Cancer Prevention Overview - [Patient Version](#).

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