

Cancer: Prevention and Screening



You likely know someone who has had cancer. Unfortunately, it affects a lot of people. The good news is that there are ways to help prevent some types of cancer. These include establishing some healthy habits and getting routine cancer screenings.

Not sure where to start? Have a talk about it with your healthcare provider. Based on your ethnic group, age, health history, and family history, they'll let you know what cancer screenings you need. They can also be a trusted partner in coming up with a plan to work on healthy habits.

Risk factors

A risk factor is anything that may increase your chance of having a disease. Here are some things to know about risk factors for cancer:

- Risk factors can increase a person's risk. But they don't always cause the disease.
- Some people with 1 or more risk factors never develop cancer. Other people with cancer have no known risk factors.
- Some risk factors are very well-known. But there's ongoing research about risk factors for many types of cancer.

Some risk factors, such as family history and age, may not be in your control. But others may be things you can change. Knowing about risk factors can help you make choices that might help lower your risk. For instance, if an unhealthy diet is a risk factor, you may choose to eat healthy foods. If excess weight is a risk factor, you can talk with your healthcare provider about how to lose weight.

The first step in creating cancer prevention habits is to identify your risk factors. Your healthcare provider can help you with this. Some risk factors for cancer include:

- Using tobacco
- Getting too much ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun
- Eating red and processed meat
- Drinking alcohol
- Having infections such as hepatitis B and human papillomavirus (HPV)
- Taking immunosuppressive medicines after an organ transplant
- Being exposed to pollution, radon, and asbestos

Some of these risk factors are unavoidable. The important thing is to focus on the risk factors you can control.

Prevention tips

The following list is a good start to staying healthy and reducing your risk for cancer. You may already include some in your daily habits. Keep in mind that you don't need to tackle every item on this list right away. Focusing on a few goals at a time can have a big impact. Work with your provider to decide what you want to prioritize.

- **Eat lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.** Try to incorporate produce like tomatoes, broccoli, and berries into meals you already enjoy. For instance, you could add veggies to a lasagna recipe. Beans, peas, and lentils are also great additions for lowering your cancer risk. Fresh, frozen, and low-salt canned produce are all great options.

- **Limit or stay away from red and processed meats, sweetened drinks, and highly processed foods.** Fill your daily meals with fish, poultry, beans, vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. Eat foods like hamburgers, soda, and ice cream sparingly.
- **Get moving.** This can mean different things to different people. Physical activity doesn't have to mean intense exercise. The best type of movement is the kind that you enjoy and that fits into your lifestyle. Don't like lifting weights? Don't do it! Physical activity can be as easy as taking a walk. Try inviting friends and family to move with you to make it fun. Whatever form of physical activity you choose, try to do it for at least 30 minutes most days. Adults should aim for 150 minutes of activity every week. It can be broken into smaller periods of time.
- **Achieve a weight that supports your health goals.** Extra weight has been linked to many types of cancer. But here's a silver lining: Your healthy eating and movement goals can help you lose some weight if you need to. It doesn't have to be a lot of weight either. Losing as little as 5% to 10% of your body weight can lower your cancer risk. For instance, if you weigh 200 pounds, losing 5% is just 10 pounds. Ask your provider about your goal weight and strategies to reach it.
- **Don't use tobacco.** Tobacco product use has been linked to various types of cancer. These include lung cancer, esophageal cancer, and stomach cancer. If you need help quitting smoking, talk with your provider or visit www.smokefree.gov for resources.
- **Avoid or limit alcohol.** It's best not to drink alcohol. If you do drink alcohol, keep it to 1 drink a day or less for women and 2 drinks a day or less for men. Doing this can help lower your risk for some cancers. These include cancers of the mouth, throat, breast, colon, rectum, esophagus, and liver.
- **Protect your skin from the sun.** You can still enjoy the outdoors while also lowering your risk for cancer. Use sunscreen, hats, clothes, and sunglasses to protect your skin from UV light. Limit your sun exposure between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. That's when the sun is most intense. Use broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher.

Cancer screening guidelines

The second part of cancer prevention is getting screened. Screening tests help find cancer early before a person has symptoms. It's often easier to treat pre-cancers and cancers when they are found early, before they spread.

Talk with your healthcare provider to see what screenings you need. They may advise some depending on your age and family history. It's also possible you may need some screenings more often depending on your risk factors.

Common types of cancer screening include:

- **Mammograms.** This exam checks for breast cancer. The American Cancer Society (ACS) suggests women start getting screened every year at age 45. Women ages 40 to 44 have the choice to start yearly mammograms if they wish. Talk with your provider about when you should start getting screened. They can help you determine the right timing for you. All women should be familiar with how their breasts usually look and feel. Report any changes to your provider right away.
- **Cervical cancer screening.** This exam may involve a Pap test, an HPV test, or a combination. The ACS recommends starting this screening at age 25. Talk with your provider about a schedule that is right for you.
- **Colorectal cancer screening.** This exam checks for colorectal cancer. There are a few screening options, including a colonoscopy and a stool-based test. The ACS recommends you start getting screened for this cancer at age 45 if you're at an average risk. Talk with your provider about when to start and your test options.
- **Lung cancer.** The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends lung cancer screening with low-dose CT scan (LDCT) for people ages 50 to 80 who currently smoke or quit in the last 15 years and have at least a 20 pack-year history. Ask your provider if lung cancer screening is right for you.

Besides official screening tests, you can watch yourself for some signs of cancers, too. Monitor any moles on your skin for sudden changes in shape, color, and size.

If you notice anything concerning, reach out to your provider as soon as possible.

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