

For Teens and Young Adults: Cancer Prevention



You probably know someone who has had cancer. It's a disease that impacts millions of people around the world every day. But there are simple steps you can take now as a teen or young adult to reduce your risk of getting cancer. These habits will also help you be your healthiest self.

Nourish your body

Healthy eating is one of the best ways to build a strong foundation for your body. That said, buying fresh produce or high-quality protein isn't always possible for your budget. That's OK. Do the best you can to fuel your body with the foods that are available to you. Try the following:

- **Eat a variety of colorful vegetables and fruits.** Be sure to include dark green, leafy vegetables. Focus on lean protein like poultry, fish, tofu, beans, and nuts. Also include whole grains in your diet.
- **Cut down on sugar, salt, and processed foods.** Diets high in sugar and processed foods have been linked to cancer. Limit red and processed meats, such as packaged and deli meats. You can still enjoy your favorite treats once in a while, though.
- **Hydration is very important.** Stick to water and other drinks that don't have a lot of added sugar, caffeine, and other additives.

Avoid tobacco and alcohol

Teens and young adults may experiment with tobacco and alcohol. But it's best to avoid alcohol, cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and vaping. Besides the tobacco in cigarettes, all these products include different mixtures of potentially toxic chemicals that can eventually lead to cancer. Alcohol can have a range of negative side effects and increase your risk for diseases like cancer. If you currently smoke or use alcohol, talk to your provider for help quitting.

Enjoy regular physical activity

Try to include some type of movement in your everyday life. Physical activity has many health benefits that can reduce the risk of certain cancers. Some benefits include regulating your hormones and strengthening your immune system.

You don't have to take up a difficult sport or exercise for hours at a time. Follow these tips:

- Teens should get at least 1 hour of exercise each day. Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise every week. You can break this time up into shorter amounts several times per week.
- You can walk, run, dance, play a team sport, join a workout class, ride your bike, or do yoga at home. Any movement counts!
- Focus on physical activity that you enjoy and actually want to do. Bonus: Along with helping prevent cancer, physical movement is a stress reliever.

Protect yourself from the sun

Spending time outside benefits the body and mind. But it's important to take sun protection seriously. Getting the occasional tan or sunburn may seem harmless. But exposure to the sun's UV rays can lead to skin cancer. To protect yourself:

- Apply sunscreen regularly. Use broad-spectrum sunscreen with at least 30 SPF.

- Wear a hat.
- Stay in the shade.
- Wear long-sleeved clothing and pants to cover your arms and legs.
- Don't spend too much time outside when the sun is strongest. This is typically from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Report any skin or mole changes to your healthcare provider right away.

People with lighter hair, skin, and eyes are at a greater risk for developing skin cancer. So are people with a family history of skin cancer. But anyone can get it.

Stay away from tanning beds and sun lamps, too. They are just as dangerous as long-term sun exposure.

Stay at your goal weight

Obesity and overweight are linked with an increased risk for certain types of cancer. Ask your healthcare provider what an ideal weight is for you. Your provider can help you get to or stay at that weight.

Practice safe sex

If you are sexually active, it's important to limit your number of sex partners and use safe sex practices. Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common sexually transmitted infection that can increase your risk for many types of cancer, such as cervical, penile, anal, vulvar, and oral cancer. Condoms provide some protection from HPV. But they can't provide complete protection. HPV can be transmitted through skin-to-skin contact with any area of the body that's infected with HPV. Limiting your number of sex partners can help reduce your risk for HPV.

See a healthcare provider regularly

Don't skip annual checkups with your healthcare provider. Seeing a provider can feel stressful and scary. But it's a great opportunity to get a better look at what's happening inside your body. Bloodwork and other tests can help you see what's going on, too. You can also talk about new or ongoing health concerns and ask questions. Your provider will also discuss any vaccines or cancer screenings that are right for you. For example, the HPV vaccine may help lower the risk of developing HPV and certain cancers.

If you don't have a healthcare provider, now is a good time to start seeing one. Ask your friends and family for recommendations. Or call your local health department, hospital, or clinic to see which providers are taking new patients. You may also visit a local health clinic that offers care for free or a reduced cost.

Build positive habits that last

Your teen and young adult years are when you start to become more independent from your parents. Being in charge of your own life can feel empowering and exciting. It can also feel overwhelming, perhaps more so if this is the first time you are in charge of something as major as your health. Follow the advice in this article to build simple and lasting habits. These can stay with you and reduce your chance of developing diseases like cancer as you age.

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