

A healthy lifestyle can help reduce cancer risk

Written by meg sibal, m.d.

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WHILE there's no guarantee you can prevent cancer, you can reduce the risk of developing it by making lifestyle changes, says the September 2015 issue of the Harvard Medical School Harvard Health Letter.

Cancer is a complex group of diseases, each characterized by the uncontrolled growth of previously normal cells — but reducing your risk for it isn't nearly as complicated: it boils down to healthy living, adds the health letter.

“Of course, maintaining a healthy lifestyle requires behavioral change, and for many people, that means work,” says Dr. Beth Overmoyer, an oncologist at Harvard-affiliated Dana Farber Cancer Institute.

There are no guarantees in life, and preventing cancer is no exception — but while lifestyle changes may not guarantee that you'll never get cancer, there is no question that they will reduce it, the health letter explains.

These five lifestyle changes to ward off cancer are offered:

1) Lose weight — For most cancers, the risk is higher in people who are overweight, according

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to Dr. Overmoyer, because of effects on hormones and changes in the immune system.

Since being overweight boosts cancer risk, can you reduce your risk of cancer by losing weight?

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“Yes, absolutely, we have evidence that if you maintain a normal body mass index you will reduce your risk,” says Dr. Overmoyer.

A healthy body mass index (BMI) score falls anywhere from 18.5 to 24.9 — you can determine your BMI with a free online calculator at health.harvard.edu/BMI.

To shed pounds, work with a dietitian to determine your target weight, the number of calories you need each day, and an eating plan that you can sustain — don't turn to fad diets.

The associations of obesity and other lifestyle factors with colorectal cancer risk are among the strongest for any cancer, the American Cancer Society says — people who are overweight or obese are at greater risk of developing and dying from colorectal cancer, and the risk seems to be stronger in men, according to the ACS.

Studies also suggest that obese men are more likely to be diagnosed with higher-grade, more aggressive disease, die from prostate cancer, or have their cancer return after treatment — one reason is that obesity may make early detection of prostate cancer with the prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test and other methods difficult, says Eric Klein, MD, Chairman of Cleveland Clinic's Glickman Urological and Kidney Institute.

“Also, it's harder to perform digital rectal exams on obese men, and you might miss something.”

2) Exercise — Another way to lower your cancer risk is through aerobic exercise, even if the regular exercise does not help you achieve a healthy weight — “The studies consistently suggest that cancer risk and cancer recurrence are reduced by up to 50% if you get enough

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aerobic exercise,” says Dr. Overmoyer.

That may be because aerobic activity changes your metabolism; reduces inflammation, fat and insulin resistance; helps you control weight.

The American Cancer Society recommends at least 150 minutes (2.5 hours) per week of moderate-intensity activity, such as brisk walking — “For breast cancer, it’s three to five hours per week,” says Dr. Overmoyer.

3) Eat a healthy diet — While we know there’s a link between red meat and colon cancer risk, no foods are proven to cause cancer — “Not even sugar,” says Dr. Overmoyer.

“The link between food and cancer is by excess weight, and eating unhealthy foods can add pounds quickly.”

The evidence is mixed about whether there are foods that can definitely prevent cancer — most experts recommend a) a diet containing foods rich in the vitamin folic acid (particularly if you drink alcoholic beverages regularly) and in Vitamin D, and b) a diet that minimizes red meat, processed meats, and excess calories.

Dr. Overmoyer suggests having no more than two servings of red meat per week and adds that “a diet full of fruits, vegetables and whole grains has many phytochemicals, enzymes, fiber and vitamins that all work together to fight many chronic diseases.”

4) Stop smoking — Toxins in tobacco can damage your DNA — “That raises the risk for cancers of the lung, tongue, mouth, larynx, bladder and cervix,” says Dr. Overmoyer.

However, the great news is that quitting smoking will reduce the risk of developing cancer — the CDC reports that five years after quitting, the chance of developing mouth, throat, esophageal or bladder cancer is cut in half.

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5) Limit alcohol — Excessive alcohol drinking — more than one drink per day for women, and one or two drinks per day for men — may hurt the body's ability a) to absorb nutrients; b) may damage DNA, proteins and fats; and c) may affect blood levels of estrogen.

It's associated with many types of cancer, including head and neck, esophageal, liver and colorectal cancer.

Breast cancer appears to be especially sensitive to alcohol consumption — “The risk starts after four drinks per week,” says Dr. Overmoyer.

To conclude, if you must drink, drink only in moderation, and speak to your doctor about any drinking if you have concerns about developing cancer, according to Dr. Overmoyer.