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Ways to Reduce Cancer Risks

The word cancer strikes fear in our lives. Fear because we all know of friends or family members who have dealt with the disease, and we are afraid that we, too, could be a victim. Many people believe that cancer is a disease that you do not have any control over and that cancer may be inevitable because of family health history.

The American Institute for Cancer Research states that cancer cases could be reduced by about one-third if everyone ate a healthy diet, was physically active every day, and maintained a healthy weight. For the vast majority of Americans, taking control of one's life to achieve these behaviors may mean lifestyle changes. It may sound complicated, but it doesn't have to be as hard as one thinks.

A good starting point is to make dietary changes by choosing a varied meal plan and reducing the serving sizes of food. When selecting meat and meat-alternate foods such as soybean, peanut butter, or other plant-based foods, select more often either plant-based foods and/or lean meat choices from the leg or loin cuts – about the size of a deck of cards. Select poultry with the skin removed. White meat contains less fat than the dark meat of chicken. Fresh fish is another good choice. Choose processed meats less often, which may be higher in fat and sodium. Select whole grain breads, cereals, pasta, and rice, all of which are good sources of fiber. Make an effort to eat a variety of dark green leafy and orange vegetables, and brightly colored fruits such as strawberries, blueberries, cranberries, citrus fruits, melons, etc. Fruits and vegetables provide phytochemicals that help protect against naturally occurring cancer risks. A diet high in fruits and vegetables has been linked to a reduced risk of cancers of the colon, esophagus, lung, and stomach.

Set a goal to be physically active every day in any way for 30 minutes or more. It does not have to be 30 minutes at the local gym, and it can be as simple as walking, gardening, and doing household chores that require you to move and be active. Walking from the back of the parking lot and taking the stairs instead of the elevator are normal ways of incorporating activity into your life. Research shows that activity can keep our hormone levels healthy, which is important because having high levels of some hormones can increase our cancer risk. For individuals with a weight problem, exercise may need to be increased along with controlling food portion sizes.

Another way you can take control is to not smoke or use tobacco in any form. The tobacco companies fight this recommendation by putting out new products that they say have less nicotine in them. Their products continue to contain ingredients that are not on your side when it comes to preventing cancer risks. More people die from lung cancer than any other type of cancer. In the United States, about 90 percent of lung cancer deaths in men and almost 80 percent in women are due to smoking. A start to quitting tobacco use is to call the American Cancer Society's Quitline at 1-877-Yes-Quit. Help will be provided on how to develop a personal

cessation plan. If you are not a smoker, avoid all secondhand smoke since it can also cause lung cancer. Spit tobacco may not produce secondhand smoke, but it is linked to cancer of the mouth, pancreas, and esophagus – it is not a safe alternative to smoking!

Skin cancer is one of the most common forms of cancer. Sun exposure is by far the most common cause of skin cancer. You can take control of any risk to skin cancer by avoiding being in the sun during peak radiation hours (between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.), by staying in the shade if you do go outside, and by covering exposed areas with clothing that protects you from the sun's rays. Add a broad-brimmed hat to cover your head and ears. Always remember to use sunscreen that has a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 on all areas of skin exposed to the sun. Indoor tanning beds or sunlamps are not safe alternatives to the sun.

Regular screening and self-examination for certain cancers can increase the chance of finding a cancer when it is treatable. Screening should include your skin, mouth, colon, and rectum. For men, it should also include your prostate and testes. Women should include cervix screening and mammograms for breast cancer. All individuals need to be aware of their body and any changes that are detected. These changes then need to be promptly communicated to a health care professional.

While screening and even self-exam does not prevent cancer, the chances of a cancer being found in the early stages will be greater. With an early diagnosis, treatment is more likely to be successful. For individuals with a family history of cancer, screenings are even more important. Screenings should be discussed with a physician who is familiar with your family health history. Immunization is an option for certain cancers associated with two viral infections that can be prevented. Hepatitis B can increase the risk of developing liver cancer. Certain high-risk individuals may need to be vaccinated against Hepatitis B. Human papillomavirus, or HPV, is a sexually transmitted virus that can lead to cervical cancer. The vaccination is recommended to girls ages 11 to 12. The Centers for Disease Control recommends that the HPV vaccine be given to girls and women ages 13 to 26 who have not completed the full vaccine series.

Many of the changes suggested for reducing the risks for cancer can also improve heart health and overall personal health. These changes can lead to feeling better about one's self and reducing stress. Unfortunately, many people are not motivated to make changes until there is a cancer diagnosis, a scare of cancer, or a friend or family member is diagnosed with cancer. If you have not already started, now is the best time to start making changes while you may still have some control over cancer affecting your life. Parents can make a difference in their children's lives by modeling good behavior and teaching them about cancer prevention.

For more information on this topic, please feel free to contact the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903/473-5000, ext. 160 or visit the Family & Consumer Sciences website at <http://fcs.tamu.edu>

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