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## **Nasopharyngeal Cancer - Risk Factors and Prevention [1]**

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[2\]](#), 03/2015

**ON THIS PAGE:** You will find out more about the factors that increase the chance of developing this type of cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chance of developing cancer. Although risk factors often influence the development of cancer, most do not directly cause cancer. Some people with several risk factors never develop cancer, while others with no known risk factors do. However, knowing your risk factors and talking about them with your doctor may help you make more informed lifestyle and health care choices.

There are two substances that greatly increase the risk of developing NPC:

- **[Tobacco \[3\]](#)**. Use of tobacco, including cigarettes, cigars, pipes, chewing tobacco, and snuff, is the single greatest risk factor for head and neck cancer. Eighty-five percent (85%) of head and neck cancer is linked to tobacco use. Smokers with NPC are most likely to have the squamous cell type. [Secondhand smoke \[4\]](#) may also increase a person's risk of developing head and neck cancer.
- **[Alcohol \[5\]](#)**. Frequent and heavy consumption of alcohol is a risk factor for head and neck cancer. Using alcohol and tobacco together increases this risk even more, although the influence of this in NPC is less than for other head and neck cancers.

Other factors that may raise a person's risk of NPC include:

- **Geography/ancestry.** NPC is most common in people who live in Southeast China and Hong Kong. When people move away from high-risk areas of the world to countries where NPC is less common, subsequent generations of their family have a gradual reduction in their inherited risk of NPC.
- **Epstein-Barr virus (EBV).** Exposure to EBV, which is more commonly known as the virus that causes mononucleosis or “mono,” plays a role in causing nasopharyngeal cancer.
- **Gender.** Men are two times more likely than women to develop NPC.
- **Age.** The risk of NPC increases as a person gets older. However, about half of the people diagnosed with NPC in the United States are younger than 55. A person of any age can be diagnosed with NPC.
- **Eating habits.** Eating large amounts of salt-cured fish and meats on a regular basis increases a person's risk of developing NPC.
- **Environmental exposure.** Extensive exposure to dust and smoke may increase the risk of NPC.
- **Marijuana.** Recent research suggests that people who have used marijuana may be at higher risk for head and neck cancer.

## Prevention

Different factors cause different types of cancer. Researchers continue to look into what factors cause this type of cancer. Although there is no proven way to completely prevent this disease, you may be able to lower your risk. Talk with your doctor for more information about your personal risk of cancer.

Although some of the risk factors of NPC cannot be controlled, such as age, several can be avoided by making lifestyle changes. [Stopping the use of all tobacco products](#) [6] is the most important thing a person can do to reduce their risk of NPC, even for people who have used tobacco products for many years.

*The next section in this guide is [Screening](#) [7], and it explains how tests may find cancer before signs or symptoms appear. Or, use the menu on the side of your screen to choose another section to continue reading this guide.*

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**Links**

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/nasopharyngeal-cancer/risk-factors-and-prevention>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25002>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25004>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24981>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25003>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/33461>