

## Cancer Myths

A vast amount of information about cancer is available online and through other sources. Unfortunately, some of it can be misleading or inaccurate. Below you will find the truth behind some of the most common cancer myths and misconceptions. You can also check with your doctor, nurse, or other member of your health care team to verify the accuracy of anything you hear or read.

### Myths about developing cancer

#### MYTH: Cancer is contagious.

No cancer is contagious (capable of spreading from person to person through contact). However, some cancers are caused by viruses. The [human papillomavirus \(HPV\)](#) [1] is a sexually transmitted disease that increases the risk of developing cervical, anal, and some types of head and neck cancers. Other viruses, such as hepatitis B and hepatitis C, which are transmitted by infected intravenous needles and sexual activity, increase the risk of developing liver cancer.

#### MYTH: You don't need to worry about cancer if no one in your family has had it.

Only 5% to 10% of cancers are hereditary (passed down by a family member). The majority of cancers are caused by genetic changes that occur throughout a person's lifetime. These changes, or mutations, are caused by factors such as tobacco use, too much ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun, and exposure to certain chemicals. However, the likelihood that a single mutation will cause cancer is small. That is one reason why cancer is more common in older people—a number of mutations have had the chance to build up throughout their life. Learn more about [risk factors and prevention](#) [2].

#### MYTH: If you have a family history of cancer, you will get it too; there's nothing you can do about it.

Although having a family history of cancer increases your risk of developing the disease, it is not a definite prediction of your future health. In fact, an estimated 4 out of 10 cancers can be prevented by making simple lifestyle changes, such as eating a balanced diet, maintaining a healthy weight, exercising, limiting alcoholic beverages, and avoiding tobacco products. Additionally, doctors may recommend that some people who have inherited a genetic mutation that puts them at high risk for cancer have surgery or take medication, known as prophylactic treatment, to further reduce the chance that cancer will develop. Learn more about [cancer genetics](#) [3] and [hereditary cancer-related syndromes](#) [4].

#### MYTH: Hair dyes and antiperspirants can cause cancer.

To date, there is no conclusive scientific evidence that these items increase the risk of developing cancer. Some studies have suggested that hair dyes used before 1980 could be linked to an increased risk of developing non-Hodgkin lymphoma, but the unsafe chemicals have since been removed from hair dye products. There is limited and inconsistent evidence that hair dye can increase the risk of other types of cancer. Additionally, there is some evidence that the skin may absorb the aluminum-based compounds that act as the active ingredient in antiperspirants. These compounds are known to cause hormonal changes, which has led some to believe that antiperspirants could contribute to the development of breast cancer. However, there is no consistent evidence to support this claim.

### Myths about coping with cancer

#### MYTH: It is sometimes easier to remain unaware that you have cancer.

You should not ignore the symptoms or signs of cancer, such as a breast lump or an abnormal-looking mole. Although the thought of having cancer is frightening, talking with your doctor and getting a diagnosis will give you the power to make informed choices and seek the best possible care. Because treatment is typically more effective during the early stages of cancer, being diagnosed early improves the likelihood of survival.

#### MYTH: Positive thinking will cure cancer.

Although a positive attitude may improve your quality of life during cancer treatment, there is no scientific evidence that it can cure cancer. Placing such importance on attitude may lead to unnecessary guilt and disappointment if, for reasons beyond your control, your health does not improve.

#### MYTH: Cancer loves sugar.

Many people with cancer wonder if they should stop eating sugar because they have heard sugar feeds cancer growth. However, there is no conclusive evidence that proves eating sugar will make cancer grow and spread more quickly. All cells in the body, both healthy cells and cancer cells, depend on sugar (glucose) to grow and function. However, providing cancer cells with sugar won't speed up their growth, just as cutting out

sugar completely won't slow down their growth. This doesn't mean you should eat a high sugar diet, though. Consuming too many calories from sugar has been linked to weight gain, obesity, and diabetes, which increase the risk of developing cancer and other diseases. Learn more about the relationship between [diet and cancer](#) [5].

**MYTH: If you are diagnosed with cancer, you will probably die.**

Cancer is not a death sentence. Advances in cancer detection and treatment have increased survival rates for most common types of cancer. In fact, more than 60% of people with cancer survive five years or more after their initial diagnosis. Learn more about [cancer survivorship](#) [6].

**MYTH: Cancer is always painful.**

Although pain is one of the most common side effects of cancer and its treatment, up to 95% of cancer pain can be successfully treated with medications and other pain management techniques. However, in order to benefit from these pain-relief strategies, you must share your symptoms with a member of your health care team. Learn more about [managing and treating cancer pain](#) [7].

**Myths about cancer treatments**

**MYTH: Drug companies, the government, and the medical establishment are hiding a cure for cancer.**

The medical community is not withholding a miracle treatment. The fact is, there will not be a single cure for cancer. Hundreds of types of cancer exist, and they respond differently to various types of treatment. In the past five years, research has shown that even common cancers like breast cancer and lung cancer contain many more genetic changes than originally thought, which makes it even more challenging to come up with effective treatments. There is still much to learn, which is why [clinical trials](#) [8] continue to be essential for making progress in preventing, diagnosing, and treating cancer.

**MYTH: Some people are too old for cancer treatment.**

There is no age limit for cancer treatment. People with cancer should receive the treatment that is best suited to their condition, regardless of age. Many older patients respond as well to cancer treatments as younger patients. However, some older adults may have other illnesses that limit the use of specific treatments, so older adults with cancer are encouraged to talk with their doctor about the best approach for managing their disease. Read more about [cancer treatment for older adults](#) [9].

**MYTH: Cancer treatment is usually worse than the disease.**

Although cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy are known to cause side effects that can be unpleasant and sometimes serious, recent advances have resulted in many chemotherapy drugs and radiation treatments that are much better tolerated than in the past. As a result, symptoms like severe nausea and vomiting, hair loss, and tissue damage are much less common these days; however, managing side effects remains an important part of cancer care. This approach, called palliative or supportive care, can help a person at any stage of illness. In fact, people who receive both treatment for the cancer and treatment to ease side effects at the same time often have less severe symptoms, better quality of life, and report they are more satisfied with treatment. Learn more about [palliative care](#) [10].

**MYTH: People being treated for cancer can't stay at home, work, or participate in their usual activities.**

Most people living with cancer are treated in their home community on an outpatient basis (with periodic appointments at a hospital or clinic rather than an overnight stay at a hospital) and often continue with some or all of their day-to-day activities. Many people can work part-time or full-time, care for their children, and attend social activities, despite undergoing cancer treatment.

**MYTH: Everyone with cancer has to be treated.**

If a cancer is found at an early stage, is growing slowly, and your doctor feels treating the cancer would cause more discomfort than the disease, your doctor may recommend active surveillance (also known as watchful waiting). During active surveillance, the cancer is monitored closely. If it starts growing or begins causing symptoms, starting treatment is usually an option.

In other situations, such as advanced cancer, emotional, social, and spiritual factors may play as much of a role as physical concerns when [making treatment decisions](#) [11]. Ultimately it is up to the patient to decide whether he or she wants to be treated. However, these decisions should be made after talking with a doctor about the potential risks and benefits of each treatment option. Even if a person decides not to have disease-directed treatment, the health care team can still provide palliative/supportive care to help reduce symptoms, improve quality of life, and support the patient and his or her family.

**MYTH: If I'm not offered all of the tests, procedures, and treatments available, I am not getting the best cancer care.**

Not every test, treatment, or procedure is right for every person. You and your doctor should discuss which ones will increase your chance of recovering and help you maintain the best quality of life and which ones could increase your risk of side effects and lead to unnecessary costs. If you decide after this discussion that you need more information before making treatment decisions, it may be helpful to seek a [second opinion](#) [12].

Learn more about [Choosing Wisely](#) [13].

**More Information**

[Medical News: How to Know If It's Accurate](#)

[14]

Evaluating Cancer Information on the Internet [15]

How to Protect Yourself From Cancer Treatment Fraud [16]

#### **Additional Resources**

MayoClinic.com?Cancer treatment myths: Any truth to these common beliefs? [17]

World Cancer Day?Cancer Myths [18]

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#### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24561>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24868>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24864>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24905>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24965>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/22>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24585>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24876>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25131>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25282>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24582>

[12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25355>

[13] <http://www.cancer.net/node/26096>

[14] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24593>

[15] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24514>

[16] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24559>

[17] [http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/cancer/HO00033/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=living-with-cancer&pubDate=01/10/2013](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/cancer/HO00033/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=living-with-cancer&pubDate=01/10/2013)

[18] <http://www.worldcancerday.org/cancer-myths>