

Myths & Facts About Cancer

There is a lot of information about cancer available, but some of it is misleading or wrong. Below are the facts behind some of the most common cancer myths and misconceptions. Your health care team is also a good resource if you have any questions about the accuracy of anything you hear or read.

MYTH: Cancer is contagious.

FACT: Cancer is not contagious. However, some cancers are caused by viruses and bacteria that can be spread from person to person. Certain types of the human papillomavirus (HPV) have been known to cause cervical, anal, and some kinds of head and neck cancers. Hepatitis B and hepatitis C are viruses that increase the risk of developing liver cancer. Bacteria like *H. pylori* can cause stomach cancer. It is important to remember that while the viruses and bacteria that cause some cancers can be spread from person to person, the cancers they cause cannot be spread from person to person.



MYTH: If you have a family history of cancer, you will get it too.

FACT: Although having a family history of cancer increases your risk of developing the disease, it is not a complete prediction of your future health. An estimated 4 out of 10 cancers can be prevented by making simple lifestyle changes, such as forming healthy eating habits, maintaining a healthy weight, exercising, limiting alcoholic beverages, and avoiding tobacco products. Additionally, if you have inherited certain cancer genes that put you at high risk for cancer, your doctor may recommend surgery or medications to reduce the chance that cancer will develop.

MYTH: Cancer thrives on sugar.

FACT: 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 to grow and function. However, eating sugar won't speed up the growth of cancer, just as cutting out sugar completely won't slow down its 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 health problems.

MYTH: Cancer treatment is usually worse than the disease.

FACT: Although cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy, can cause unpleasant and sometimes serious side effects, recent advances have resulted in many 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. However, managing side effects, also called palliative care, remains an important part of cancer care. Palliative care can help a person feel more comfortable 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.

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

FACT: 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 usually more effective during the early stages of cancer, an early diagnosis often improves a person's chances of survival.

MYTH: My attitude will have an effect on my cancer.

FACT: There is no scientific evidence that a positive attitude will prevent cancer, help people with cancer live longer, or keep cancer from coming back. However, things that promote positive thinking such as relaxation techniques, support groups, and a strong network of family and friends may improve a person's quality of life and outlook. It is important to remember that placing such an importance on attitude may lead to unnecessary guilt and disappointment if, for reasons beyond your control, your health does not improve.

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

FACT: No one is withholding a cure for cancer. 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. There is still much to learn, which is why clinical trials continue to be essential for making progress in preventing, diagnosing, and treating cancer.

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

FACT: Not every test, treatment, or procedure is right for every person. You and your doctor should discuss which ones will increase your chance of recovery and help you maintain the best quality of life. You should also discuss 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.

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2318 Mill Road, Suite 800, Alexandria, VA 22314 | Toll Free: 888-651-3038 | Phone: 571-483-1300
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WORDS TO KNOW

Benign:

A growth that is not cancerous

Cancer:

A group of more than 100 different diseases characterized by abnormal cell growth and the ability to invade nearby tissues

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Contagious:

Capable of spreading from person to person through contact

Family history:

Having one or more close relatives who have been diagnosed with a disease

Malignant:

A cancerous growth or tumor

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

Risk:

The likelihood of an event

Screening:

The process of checking whether a person has a disease or has an increased chance of developing a disease when the person has no symptoms

Symptom management:

The relief of side effects, also called palliative or supportive care

Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue

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