

ASCO ANSWERS

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT CANCER

There is a lot of information about cancer available, but some of it is misleading or inaccurate. Below you will find the truth behind some of the most common cancer myths and misconceptions. You can also talk with your health care team to verify the accuracy of anything you hear or read.

MYTH: CANCER IS CONTAGIOUS.

No cancer is contagious. However, some cancers are caused by viruses that can be spread from person to person. The human papillomavirus (HPV) 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.



Find additional cancer information at www.cancer.net.

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 nutritious 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 (change) that puts them at high risk for cancer have surgery or take medication to reduce the chance that cancer will develop.

MYTH: CANCER THRIVES ON 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, 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.

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 these days. Managing side effects still remains an important part of cancer care, though. 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.

MYTH: IT IS EASIER TO REMAIN UNAWARE 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 usually more effective during the early stages of cancer, an early diagnosis often improves a person's chances of survival.

MYTH: POSITIVE THINKING WILL CURE CANCER.

Although a positive attitude may improve a person's 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: DRUG COMPANIES, THE GOVERNMENT, AND THE MEDICAL ESTABLISHMENT ARE HIDING A CURE FOR CANCER.

No one is 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. 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.

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 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.



Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO[®]

For more information, visit ASCO's patient website, www.cancer.net, or call 888-651-3038.

The ideas and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) or The Conquer Cancer Foundation. The information in this fact sheet is not intended as medical or legal advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a physician or other licensed health care provider. Patients with health care-related questions should call or see their physician or other health care provider promptly and should not disregard professional medical advice, or delay seeking it, because of information encountered here. The mention of any product, service, or treatment in this fact sheet should not be construed as an ASCO endorsement. ASCO is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of or related to any use of ASCO's patient education materials, or to any errors or omissions.

TERMS 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