

CANCER PREVENTION 101

We all wish for a good life with happiness, but when our health, or that of a friend or family member, is compromised, it consumes us. Perhaps the most dreaded threat is the big “C.” For 2008, it is predicted that there will be over 1.44 million people diagnosed with cancer and more than 560,000 cancer deaths. Unfortunately, everyone is vulnerable.

Cancer occurs when one of our normal cells has a DNA mutation that causes a rapid and uncontrolled division. This malfunctioning cell population, no longer recognizing “self,” competes with our normal tissue for blood supply and nutrients. These cancer cells may then invade other parts of our body, or metastasize, causing organ failure and possible death if left untreated.

Because of senescence, or biological aging, our cells lose the ability to maintain cellular repair and immune surveillance. That can be one reason why certain cancers are almost expected once a certain age is reached, such as prostate cancer in older men.

While cannot control genetics and aging, we can control our environmental and lifestyle choices, which is sometimes more than half the battle. Specifically, tobacco, alcohol, dietary, occupational, and physical activities and even our reproductive and beauty habits affect our cancer risk. There are things we can do in our *everyday lives* that are easy and still allow us some fun!

The first step starts with your doctor. There are cancer screening guidelines according to age, past medical and family history, and perhaps even past chemical or viral exposure that your general practitioner can address. For example, women should get a pap smear by age 21 or earlier and a screening mammogram by age 40 or earlier if strong risk factors. Both genders should get a screening colonoscopy by age 50 or earlier. Lung, prostate, skin, and ovarian cancer screenings are discretionary at this time. We do know, however, that cancer screenings can prevent up to 35% of cancer deaths.

Simple daily lifestyle changes:

1. A healthy diet is important. So far, there has been mainly indirect evidence for healthy diets decreasing cancer risk, but the point is that it can't hurt. “Power foods” loaded with antioxidants, fiber, and vitamins include fruits, veggies, green tea, whole-grains, fish with omega-3-fatty acids, yogurt, nuts, soy, etc.
2. Stop smoking. First- and second-hand smoking increases our risk of virtually every cancer. Smoking also negatively affects every major organ system in our body.
3. Limit alcohol consumption. Modest alcohol intake, especially red wine, can be heart-healthy. But excess alcohol consumption can increase risk of breast, oral, esophageal, and perhaps liver cancer.
4. Exercising 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week is recommended with the approval of your physician.

5. There is a new HPV vaccine for females age 9-26 years which may prevent cervical cancer. Most importantly, preventing transmission of this STD is essential.
6. Get the right amount of sun exposure. Unless you are getting adequate Vitamin D through diet, 5-30 minutes of natural sunlight twice a week (more if you are darker skinned or elderly), should provide the amount you need. Vitamin D as a hormone may protect against breast, colon, prostate, ovarian, and ironically, even some skin cancers! But excess UV exposure can increase our risk for skin cancers including the dreaded melanoma.
7. Women should do monthly breast self-exams and men testicular self-exams. Both genders, especially with a previous history of skin cancer, should do monthly skin self-checks.
8. Wear your sunscreen and reapply often. It can prevent squamous cell carcinoma of the skin and hopefully, melanoma, without greatly affecting Vitamin D synthesis.
9. Brush and floss at least daily and see your dentist regularly. One recent study suggests gum disease may be associated with up to 14% higher cancer rate.

For more information on this topic, go to: www.cancer.gov and www.cdc.gov

Roopal Bhatt, MD is a Dermatologist starting her practice in the Four Points Area. To reach her for questions on this topic or others, please e-mail her at contact@fourpointsdermatology.com.