

May Be the Key to Cancer Prevention

By Serena Gordon
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SATURDAY, March 29 (HealthDay News) -- Imagine therapies that could cut cancer deaths in half.

Well, these "breakthrough" treatments are here, according to a recent American Cancer Society report that said as many as 50 percent of cancer deaths could be prevented with lifestyle changes, such as quitting smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, and getting screened for certain malignancies.

"Nearly half of all cancer is related to two things -- tobacco and obesity," said Dr. Jay Brooks, chief of hematology/oncology at Ochsner Health System in Baton Rouge, La. "That's something I don't think people truly grasp."

Dr. Neil Hayes, a medical oncologist specializing in lung and head and neck cancers at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, concurred. "Most of my patients are smokers, so it's rare I see someone truly surprised by the diagnosis. But I don't think they fully think through the risk associated with smoking," he said.

Evaluating your risk of cancer, and taking steps to modify those risk factors within your control, could save your life.

Smoking is far and away the leading cause of preventable cancer deaths. In the United States, nearly one-third of all cancer deaths -- more than 170,000 Americans -- each year are related to tobacco use, according to the American Cancer Society (ACS). Yet, almost one in four American adults still uses tobacco. And, about 22 percent of teens are still lighting up.

"Not smoking is the single most important thing you can do to lower your risk of cancer," Brooks said.

Another important risk factor cited by the cancer society is the increasing girth of the average American. Poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and excess weight are likely at the root of as many as 188,277 cancer deaths annually, according to the ACS.

A recent New England Journal of Medicine study that included more than 900,000 U.S. adults found that the heaviest people had the highest risk of death -- 52 percent higher for men and 62 percent for women -- compared to people of normal weight.

However, what isn't yet known, Hayes said, is if proper nutrition can prevent that increased risk. "We have an incomplete understanding of diet's impact on cancer. But a healthy lifestyle is associated with all kinds of good things," he said.

The ACS recommends eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, and getting at least 30 to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity at least five days a week. Walking, biking and skating are examples of moderate activity, while jogging, fast bicycling, weight training, aerobics and swimming are considered vigorous activity.

Hayes said too much alcohol is also associated with some cancers, particularly tumors of the esophagus, pharynx, and mouth. The ACS recommends that women drink no more than one alcoholic beverage a day and men no more than two alcoholic drinks a day.

Then there's the lifesaving issue of screenings. Some cancer screenings, such as those for skin, breast, cervical and colon cancers, can actually detect precancerous changes that may eventually lead to malignancies.

For instance, with a colonoscopy a doctor can find and remove polyps before they turn into cancer. The ACS report estimated that as many as half of the 55,000 colon cancer deaths that occur each year could be prevented with proper screening.

"Aside from avoiding tobacco and maintaining a healthy body weight, cancer screening is the most important thing people can do to reduce their chances of dying from cancer," the ACS report stated.

More information

To learn more about cancer prevention, visit the [Cancer Research and Prevention Foundation](#).

SOURCES: Neil Hayes, M.D., assistant professor of medicine, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill; Jay Brooks, M.D., chief, hematology/oncology, Ochsner Health System, Baton Rouge, La.

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