

Understanding Cancer Risk

Cancer risk is most often used to describe the chance that a person will get cancer and that cancer will come back or recur. Doctors and researchers work to determine these risk factors to help improve people's overall health and well-being.

Understanding Common Risk Factors

A cancer risk factor is anything that increases a person's chance of getting cancer. However, most risk factors do not directly cause cancer. Some people with several risk factors never develop cancer while others with no known risk factors do.

It is important to know potential risk factors and talk about them with a health care team. Doing so can enable patients to make better lifestyle choices to improve their health. This information could also help doctors decide if there is a need for genetic testing and counseling.

General cancer risk factors include:

- Old age
- A personal or family history of cancer
- Tobacco use
- Obesity
- Alcohol intake
- Some types of viral infections, such as human papillomavirus (HPV)
- Specific chemicals
- Exposure to radiation, including ultraviolet radiation from the sun

While some risk factors, like family history, are out of a person's control, avoiding some of these factors can help lessen the risk. These include using tobacco and alcohol, being overweight, and getting multiple sunburns.

Understanding Absolute and Relative Risk

Doctors use absolute risk and relative risk to assess if a person's risk is higher or lower than that of either the general population or a certain group of people.

- **Absolute risk** is the chance that a person will develop a disease during a given time. This identifies how many people are at risk for disease in the general population. For instance, consider the statement "1 out of 8 women (12.5%) will get breast cancer in her lifetime." This describes the absolute risk for the general population of women. It cannot identify the risk for a certain person or

group of people. For example, absolute risk cannot show if a group of older women has a higher risk of breast cancer than a group of younger women.

- **Relative risk** compares the risk of disease between two groups of people. It compares one group with a certain risk factor for a disease to another group's risk. When someone is at high risk or low risk of getting cancer, it is referring to that person's relative risk. Relative risk is usually shown as a percentage or ratio. The ratio is based on the value of one. A value above one means a higher risk and a value below one means a lower risk.

If you want to compare the research you hear about in the news to your own situation, make sure you find the absolute risk. Most research studies report relative risks. This can make the risk sound higher than it actually is.

Questions to Ask Your Health Care Team

Statistical language can be hard to understand. Ask your health care team to explain what this information means in your situation. Consider bringing up these questions about cancer risk:

- What risk factors do I have? How do they affect my risk of cancer?
- What is my chance of developing cancer in the next 5 years? In my lifetime?
- What can I do to lower my risk of cancer?
- What if I change my behavior to eliminate a risk factor (for example, quit smoking or lose weight)? Then what are my chances of getting cancer in the next 5 years? In my lifetime?
- What if I find out about a new risk factor, such as a relative developing cancer? Then how much does the risk increase?
- What cancer screening tests do you recommend? How often should I have them?

Resources

- The American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
- Advanced Breast Cancer Community: www.advancedbreastcancercommunity.org
- Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/cancer
- Prostate Cancer Foundation (PCF): www.pcf.org

Some content on this page was gathered from the National Cancer Institute, an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services: www.cancer.gov.

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