

# What Causes Cancer and What Can I Do to Avoid It?

A good question and one we're all interested in, for obvious reasons. Most people agree they would do almost anything to avoid developing cancer. Well, it turns out there are many things that can be done to reduce the chances of developing cancer.

Some of them are obvious. You probably already know that most lung cancer is caused by smoking. But what isn't as commonly known is that smoking also increases the risk for throat, mouth, esophagus, stomach, pancreas, kidney, cervix and bladder cancers, among others. By stopping smoking a person decreases the risk for all of these cancers, as well as decreasing risk for heart attack, stroke, and emphysema. Ask your doctor about medications she can prescribe to help you kick the habit. It's not easy, and for most people, it takes at least three tries to successfully quit smoking. But the benefits are enormous.

Obesity (being overweight) significantly increases the risk for many cancers, including breast, colon, ovary, kidney, esophagus, and gallbladder. One of the ways we think obesity puts women at risk for breast cancer, is that fat cells produce estrogen and estrogen causes estrogen-responsive breast cancer to grow faster. But the bad news doesn't stop there. Not only does obesity increase a woman's risk for breast cancer, it increases her risk of dying from it once she has it.

Another way in which obesity results in cancer is by causing acid reflux (heartburn),

which increases the risk for esophageal cancer. Gallstone disease is more common in overweight people, and gallstones increase the risk for gallbladder cancer. If you would like more information about the link between obesity and cancer, go to the National Cancer Institute website: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/obesity>.

Finally, a few words about the importance of diet and exercise. Thousands of cancer deaths a year might be avoided by maintaining a healthy body and weight. Studies have shown that men and women who regularly eat red meat are significantly more likely to develop colon cancer and when meat is charred in the cooking process, that risk increases even more. In fact, colon cancer rates are highest in western countries where people consume a lot of red meat. When we look at people living in countries where the diet is mostly fish or plant-based, colon cancer rates are about 40 times lower than in the United States. But if those people move here, they begin developing colon cancer at the same rate as their neighbors. Alcohol and fat intake, being a 'couch potato' and carrying excess weight also increase colon cancer risk.

Cancer patients are invited to make an appointment our Clinical Registered Dietitian to discuss individualized guidance about proper nutrition and how to integrate healthy options into their diet.



**Robert A. Dichmann, MD**  
Hematology/Oncology



**Todd M. Erickson, MD**  
Hematology/Oncology  
Internal Medicine



**April Kennedy, MD**  
Hematology/Oncology



**Stephen J. Vara, MD**  
Hematology/Oncology  
Internal Medicine

If you would like help getting started or would like to meet with our Clinical Registered Dietitian, Kelly Tomita, please call **805.219.HOPE (4673)**.

