



# Understanding the Basics of Cancer

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In the United States, cancer is the second leading cause of death each year. Kentucky faces the highest cancer occurrence and death rates in the United States. According to the North American Association of Central Cancer Registries (NAACCR), the top cancers in Kentucky during the period from 2011 through 2015 were breast (female), prostate, lung, colorectal, uterine, and skin melanomas. According to the American Cancer Society, Kentucky will have an estimated 26,400 new cancer cases in 2019 leading to an estimated 10,580 deaths from cancer in Kentucky during the year 2019. Fortunately, through prevention and treatments these numbers can be reduced.

## What is Cancer?

Cancer is a disease in which cells grow and divide abnormally in the body. These damaged cells spread to other parts of the body making it hard for the body to function normally. The abnormal cells can grow together forming a mass called a tumor. Cancer is a word used to refer to several different but related diseases.

Usually cancer is named by what organ it affects first. For example, if cancer is found first in the lungs, it is called lung cancer. It is important to remember that cancer cannot be spread like the flu or a cold. Cancer is not contagious.

## What Causes Cancer?

Even though the causes of cancer are complex, all types share one cause—a change to our DNA. Our DNA controls how cells grow and divide. The abnormal cancerous cells disrupt and change our DNA, causing normal cells to become unhealthy. We know that there is not just one single cause of cancer; many risk factors and genetics can influence the possibility of cancer. DNA mutations may be:

- Inherited from our parents
- Naturally occurring over time and unpreventable
- A result of certain environmental and behavioral factors
- Caused by a combination of factors

## Lifestyle Choices Can Prevent Cancer

Cancer can happen to anyone, but you can make lifestyle choices that reduce your risk or even improve chances of beating cancer during treatment. Following are tips to keep you healthy and prevent cancer.

### Get screened

In a screening, a healthcare provider examines you for a disease before you see any symptoms. If your family has a history of cancer or you have a certain health condition that could increase



your risk for cancer, doctors may encourage screenings. Typical cancer screening timelines are listed below, but your healthcare provider may recommend an earlier screening if you have a higher risk.

Type of cancer	Who?	Age range
Cervical	Women	21-65
Breast	Women	40-74
Colorectal	Everyone	50-75

**Maintain a healthy weight**

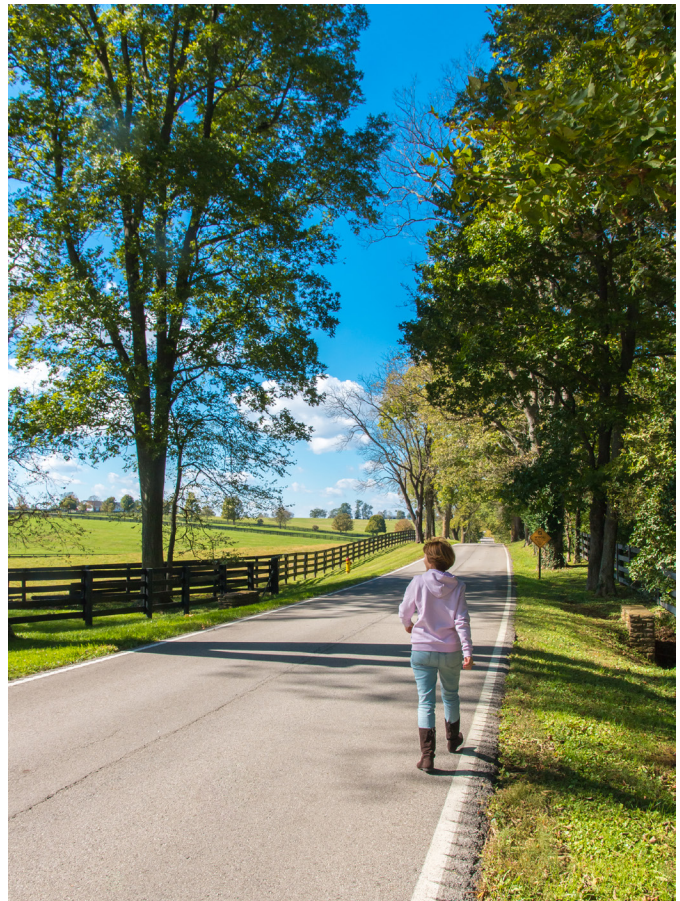
Obesity has been linked to several types of cancers. Reduce your cancer risk by achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight. Eat and drink based on your energy needs. Every body type has a different weight that is considered healthy, so talk to your healthcare provider for specific recommendations.

**Stay physically active**

The CDC recommends adults should get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity (walking) or 75 minutes of vigorous activity (anything that gets your heart rate up) each week. According to the American Cancer Society, getting the recommended 150 minutes or more of activity per week can reduce the risk of several types of cancer, including breast, endometrium, prostate, and colon cancer. Physical activity also reduces the risk of other diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

**Eat a healthy diet**

Make fruit, vegetables, and wholegrain foods the basis of your diet. Try to reduce your consumption of unhealthy snacks, fast food, and sugary drinks. Studies show that eating a variety of vegetables and fruits, whole grains, and fish or poultry is linked with a lower risk of developing certain cancers.



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**Avoid tobacco**

In the U.S., tobacco products have an influence in almost one out of every five deaths per year. According to the American Cancer Society, about 80 percent of lung cancer deaths and 30 percent of all cancer deaths are caused by tobacco use. If you do not use tobacco products, do not start. If you do, try to quit. If you need help quitting tobacco, ask your doctor about tobacco cessation and other strategies for quitting.

**Limit alcohol**

If you drink, try to stay within the Dietary Guidelines for Americans of drinking one drink per day for women and up to two drinks per day for men. The American Cancer Society research has shown that alcohol can increase your risk of cancer, including breast, mouth, throat, voice box, esophagus, liver, colon, and rectal cancer. Cutting down on alcohol will reduce your cancer risk.

## ***Protect your skin***

Skin cancer is one of the most common types of cancer. Some of the best ways to prevent skin cancer is to use sunscreen, limit time in the sun, and stay away from tanning beds.

## **Common Cancer Terms**

When learning about cancer prevention and/or treatment, your doctors might use words that you have never heard before. To better understand common cancer terms, the American Cancer Society has developed a list of terms you might hear:

- **Benign** (be-NINE): a tumor that is not cancer.
- **Biopsy** (BY-op-see): taking out a piece of tissue or tumor to see if cancer cells are in it.
- **Cancer** (CAN-sur): a word used to describe more than 100 diseases in which cells grow out of control; or a tumor with cancer in it.
- **Chemotherapy** (key-mo-THER-uh-pee): the word most often refers to drugs used to treat cancer; sometimes called “chemo.”
- **Malignant** (muh-LIG-nunt): cells that are cancerous.
- **Metastasis/Metastasized** (meh-TAS-tuh-sis/meh-TAS-tuh-sized): the spread of cancer cells to distant parts of the body through the lymph system or bloodstream.
- **Oncologist** (on-KAHL-uh-jist): a doctor who treats people who have cancer.
- **Radiation therapy** (ray-dee-A-shun THER-uh-pee): the use of high-energy rays, like x-rays, to treat cancer.
- **Remission** (re-MISH-un): when signs or symptoms of cancer are all or partly gone.
- **Stage**: a word that tells whether a cancer has spread, and if so, how far.
- **Tumor**: a lump or growth of cells that may or may not be cancer.

## **Talking to Your Healthcare Providers**

There is a lot to learn about cancer and treatment, and being able to talk with healthcare providers about concerns may help you feel more comfortable. Following are some ways to help you remember everything your doctor tells you.

- Write down your questions before you meet with a healthcare provider.
- Take notes on what your doctor says.
- Ask if you can record your visits.
- Take a family member or friend with you. They can help remind you of questions to ask and take notes for you.

## **Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Providers**

Do not be embarrassed or afraid to ask questions. Good communication is key to cancer treatment. Below you will find questions adapted from the American Cancer Society. Not all of these questions will apply to you; ask your treatment team the questions that apply to your specific situation.

### ***When told you have cancer, ask...***

- What kind of cancer is it?
- Where is the cancer located? Has it spread beyond where it started?
- What is the cancer’s stage? What does that mean?
- How does this affect my treatment options and long-term outcome (prognosis)?
- What are my treatment choices?

### ***When deciding on a treatment plan, ask...***

- How much will I have to pay for treatment? Will my insurance cover it?
- How long will treatment last? What will it involve? Where will it be done?
- What risks and side effects should I expect?

- What can I do to reduce the side effects of the treatment?
- What are the chances the cancer will come back after this treatment?
- How will treatment affect my daily activities?
- What should I do to get ready for treatment?

***After you have decided on treatment, ask...***

- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- What symptoms or side effects should I tell you about right away?
- Can you suggest a mental health professional I can see if I start to feel overwhelmed, depressed, or distressed?
- Are there any limits on what I can eat during treatment?
- What kind of exercise should I do, and how often?
- Will I need special tests, such as imaging scans or blood tests, and how often?

***After treatment, ask...***

- What type of follow-up will I need after treatment?
- How will I know if the cancer has come back? What should I watch for?
- What are my options if the cancer comes back?
- Are there any limits on what I can eat after treatment?
- What kind of exercise should I do, and how often?

**Resources**

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