

# Lowering Your Risk for Cancer

Many people have questions about cancer risks and the environment. There are steps we can all take to prevent or minimize cancer risks.

While many cancers do not have one specific cause, some cancers do have known risk factors.



## Things we do in our daily lives can decrease our chance of developing cancer.

These factors are sometimes called “lifestyle factors,” or modifiable risk factors (risk factors we can reduce).

Making healthy choices can lower your risk:

- Avoiding commercial tobacco, including e-cigarettes and vapes
- Eating a healthy diet, with limited processed meats
- Not drinking alcohol or doing so only in moderation
- Being physically active
- Protecting yourself from the sun
- Getting vaccinated against hepatitis B and human papillomavirus (HPV)

- Practicing safer sex and not sharing needles
- Getting regular medical care including screenings for certain types of cancer and guidance on performing regular self-exams

As many as three in five cancer deaths could be avoided if people take these risk reduction steps.

For more information on risk factors and the causes of cancer for individuals, see the “What is Cancer?” information sheet [www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment](http://www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment).

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The infographic consists of ten circular icons arranged in a grid, each with a corresponding text label. The icons are: 1. A cigarette in a blue ashtray with the text 'Avoid commercial tobacco'. 2. A hamburger with a slice of meat and a bun with the text 'Limit processed meats'. 3. A plate of vegetables and a hard-boiled egg with the text 'Eat healthy foods'. 4. Three bottles of alcohol with the text 'Limit alcohol'. 5. A medical syringe with the text 'Get vaccinated'. 6. A medical syringe with the text 'Don't share needles'. 7. A condom with the text 'Practice safe sex'. 8. A person running on a path with the text 'Be physically active'. 9. A sun hat and sunglasses with the text 'Use sun protection'. 10. A stethoscope and a clipboard with the text 'Get regular screenings'.

### How can I protect myself from cancer-causing and other toxic substances in the environment?

The term “environment” includes air, water, and soil, but also substances and conditions in the workplace, schools, home, and other places people live, work, and play.

The most significant risks of developing cancer come from lifestyle factors. However, in some cases, exposures to certain chemicals in the environment may contribute to a community’s or an individual’s risk of developing cancer. Substances that can increase the risk of cancer when people are exposed to them include benzene, asbestos, vinyl chloride, radon, trichlorethylene, and arsenic. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified such substances as *known human carcinogens*. Some other chemicals have been shown to cause cancer in animals, but there is not enough evidence to show these chemicals cause cancer in people. IARC classifies those chemicals as *possible or probable (suspected) human carcinogens*.

**Lower income communities and communities of color are more likely to live near sources of pollution, such as garbage dumping or burning sites, industrial manufacturing, and heavy vehicle traffic. Being close to such sources may increase exposure to harmful pollutants and cancer risk.**

The type of carcinogen and the amount a person is exposed to influences the risk of developing cancer. In some cases, exposure to more than one carcinogen increases the risk of some cancers even more. Exposure means that the carcinogen enters the person’s body.

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**At home:** Your home provides your family with comfort and protection, but it may also have hidden health hazards, such as lead, mold and moisture, carbon monoxide, pesticides, and hazardous household products. Many homes also have safety hazards that may cause physical injuries, fires, poisonings, and other emergencies. Creating a healthier home, whether in new construction or in existing housing, is good for your family’s health and well-being. Visit the MDH Healthy Homes website for more information and guidance on how to identify and reduce health hazards in your home at [www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/healthyhomes/index.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/healthyhomes/index.html).

**The air you breathe:** On average, Americans spend approximately 90 percent of their time indoors with the largest percentage of time spent within their homes. If you use chemicals in the home, such as pesticides, paints, paint thinners, cleaning solvents, preservatives, or commercial tobacco, the following steps will decrease exposure to hazards that increase risks of cancer or other harmful effects:

- Read labels and follow directions carefully
- Use these chemicals only in a well-ventilated environment—outdoors when possible
- Get rid of partially full containers of old or unneeded chemicals (following community guidelines for disposal of household hazardous waste)
- Make substitutions for less toxic substances whenever possible
- Go outdoors to smoke cigarettes or other commercial tobacco

## Lowering Your Risk for Cancer (continued)

- Test your home for radon. An estimated 2 out of 5 homes in Minnesota contain unhealthy levels of radon gas. Next to tobacco use, radon is the greatest risk factor for lung cancer. For a list of local city or county agencies that distribute radon information and test kits, contact MDH at: 1-800-798-9050 or 651-201-4601 or visit: [www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/indoorair/radon/index.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/indoorair/radon/index.html)
- Your home may contain flooring, roofing, insulation or other products with asbestos — do not disturb or remove any asbestos containing material. For more information, contact MDH at: 651-201-4620 or visit MDH's asbestos webpages: [www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/asbestos/](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/asbestos/)

**The water you drink:** Minnesota is lucky to have abundant supplies of clean water, but in some areas, there may be naturally-occurring or human-made chemicals to which you could be exposed. Some drinking water, and some plumbing (especially from lead pipes) may be sources of contamination. Visit the MDH webpage “Water Contaminants and Your Health” ([www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/water/ground-water/index.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/water/ground-water/index.html)) for information about your source of drinking water, whether you use a private well or a public water supply.

### If you live in a home or apartment built

**before 1978:** Old paint may contain lead or other toxic metal. Peeling paint should be safely removed or covered. For more information on the health risks of lead in homes and lead removal, visit the MDH webpage [www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/lead/index.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/lead/index.html)

### At work:

- Be aware of any carcinogenic substances used in your workplace
- Participate in workplace safety and hazard communication training programs
- Read labels and take precautions as directed
- Use recommended personal protective equipment

**In your community:** Stay informed. If you have concerns regarding pollutants in your community, contact the agencies responsible for safeguarding our environment and our health, including:

- The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency [www.pca.state.mn.us](http://www.pca.state.mn.us)
- The Minnesota Department of Health, Division of Environmental Health [www.health.state.mn.us/about/org/eh](http://www.health.state.mn.us/about/org/eh)
- Members of tribal communities may contact their Natural Resource Management or Environmental Health departments [mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/seniors/health-care/health-care-programs/contact-us/county-tribal-offices.jsp](http://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/seniors/health-care/health-care-programs/contact-us/county-tribal-offices.jsp)





### How can I report concerns about cancer in my community?

To share concerns about cancer in your community, please contact the **Minnesota Cancer Reporting System** at 651-201-5900 or email [health.mcrs@state.mn.us](mailto:health.mcrs@state.mn.us).

To report concerns about cancer in your community due to exposure to an environmental contaminant, please contact the **Minnesota Department of Health Environmental Health Division** at 651-201-4897 or email [health.hazard@state.mn.us](mailto:health.hazard@state.mn.us).

### Did You Know?

State and federal regulatory standards and guidelines are often designed to limit potential carcinogens where they apply to ensure the risk of harm remains very low



### What can I do if I have concerns about cancer?

**Talk to a health care provider.** If you have health concerns about cancer it is important to discuss your questions with a health care professional, such as a physician, nurse practitioner, traditional healer, community health worker, or community health representative.

Screening can identify certain cancers early when they are more easily treatable and reduce the risk of death from those cancers. Effective screening programs exist for breast, cervical, colorectal, and lung cancers.

**Learn more.** Visit our website at [www.health.state.mn.us](http://www.health.state.mn.us) for information about cancer, or [www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment](http://www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment) for information about cancer and the environment.

**Review lifestyle factors.** Preventing cancer through healthy daily living is important. For more information, see the “Lowering Your Risk for Cancer” information sheet [www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment](http://www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment).

## Resources

A list of substances known to elevate the risk of cancer can be found on our website, [www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment](http://www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment).

The American Cancer Society (ACS) ([www.cancer.org/about-us/local/minnesota.html](http://www.cancer.org/about-us/local/minnesota.html)) also provides information and resources for Minnesotans with cancer.

The Minnesota Department of Health’s Sage Cancer Screening ([www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/cancer/sage/index.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/cancer/sage/index.html)) provides free breast and cervical cancer screening for those who qualify. Call Sage to learn more: 1-888-643-2584.

To learn more about cancer, cancer resources, and prevention, visit us at our website, [www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment](http://www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment).



**The Minnesota Department of Health is here for you.**

Our vision is for health equity in Minnesota, where all communities are thriving and all people have what they need to be healthy.