30 Everyday Activities That Can Cause Cancer

Everyone knows that there are activities and habits that can increase your risk of cancer, like smoking, drinking, or overeating. But there are a lot of things we do every day that can also cause our risk of cancer to increase. Cancer is the second leading cause of U.S. deaths after heart disease, so knowing the risk factors and working to protect yourself just makes sense.

The good news is that “There’s major evidence we can reduce the rates of cancer in the population through prevention.” Susan Gapstur, MPH, Ph.D., and Senior Vice President of behavioral and epidemiology research for the American Cancer Society, believes that limiting your exposure to the following known cancer-causing foods, activities, and jobs can help greatly reduce your risk!

# 1: Sun Exposure

(<https://images.pexels.com/photos/87611/sun-fireball-solar-flare-sunlight-87611.jpeg?auto=compress&cs=tinysrgb&h=750&w=1260>)

In the summer, laying out on the beach is an extremely popular activity. People take to the ocean in droves to relax and get some sun. But while being in the sun can help you feel good, it’s also the leading cause of skin cancer. UV rays damage the fibers in your skin and can cause discoloration, tumors, and both precancerous and cancerous skin lesions.

It’s never too late to protect yourself from further sun damage and help prevent skin cancer, though! Make sure that you’re wearing sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or greater, avoid as much sun exposure between 10:00 am and 2:00 pm (peak UV radiation hours), and make sure you’re wearing protective clothing. Following these simple rules will let you enjoy the sun safely and reduce your risk of skin cancer.

# 2: Fake Tanning

(<https://www.rd.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/solarium-tanning-bed-with-closed-lid-and-all-lights-on.jpg>)

You might think that choosing an indoor tan is safer and healthier for you than tanning in the sun. However, studies have shown that tanning beds and all their associated equipment can be as deadly - and sometimes deadlier - than sun exposure. Even one tanning bed session can increase your risk of developing melanoma by 20%, and the American Academy of Dermatology believes that over 400,000 cases of skin cancer each year may be caused by indoor tanning.

How can you avoid increasing your risk of cancers like melanoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and basal cell carcinoma? Simply put: don’t tan! The tanning bed might be tempting and everyone loves that summer glow, but tanning beds are dangerous. If you really want a tan, consider a self-tanning lotion or cream, or hit up a sunless tanning booth. These options are generally considered safe as long as proper instructions are followed.

# 3: Frequent Flying

(<https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2015/01/26/09/28/travel-612508_960_720.jpg>)

Whether you’re a flight attendant, a pilot, or a jet-setting businessperson, you are at a much higher risk of a variety of cancers. Female flight attendants have a 50% higher risk of breast cancer than women in other professions, and frequent flyers are four times more likely to get non-melanoma skin cancer.

Cabin crews are also at an increased risk of cervix, thyroid, colon, liver, and stomach cancer. However, if you’re not a frequent flyer, you likely won’t be exposed to enough ionizing radiation to matter.

# 4: Smoking

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/cigarette-smoke-embers-ash-burns-110849/>)

There are 4,800 toxic substances found in cigarettes, and you inhale every single one of them every time you light up. If you smoke, your life expectancy is at least 10 years shorter than non-smokers, and your risk of heart attack, lung disease, and a variety of cancers is increased.

The good news: if you stop smoking before age 40, you reduce your risk of dying from a smoking-related disease by almost 90%. And even if you’re over 40, your body notices increased benefits from quitting almost instantly. After 3 months your lung capacity is improved, and after 5 years your risk of dying from stomach, mouth, throat, lung, or esophageal cancer is halved.

# 5: Drinking

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/cheers-beverage-drink-booze-839865/>)

Alcohol may be good for your heart - you’ll often hear people say that a glass of wine a day is beneficial. But there’s a lot of research to suggest that regular consumption of alcohol can account for an increased risk of cancer in both men and women. Alcohol consumption has been shown to increase the development of several types of cancer, including breast cancer, liver cancer, and esophageal cancer.

If you drink 2-3 drinks a day, or any more than 10 drinks a week, you’re at increased risk. However, cutting your alcohol consumption can positively impact your life in multiple ways! You’ll likely lose weight and will almost definitely reduce your cholesterol, which will also help prevent cancer.

# 6: Exposure to Secondhand Smoke

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/cigarettes-ash-tilt-smoking-83571/>)

Even if you don’t smoke yourself, exposure to secondhand smoke can raise your cancer risk. There’s really no safe level of exposure, and while most public places have banned smoking on the premises, it can be hard to avoid smoke in your home or at private gatherings. Being in the home of someone who smokes, even if they’re not actively smoking at the time, can still harm you; chemicals from cigarette smoke can stick around in furniture and carpets.

The best way to protect yourself from secondhand smoke is to avoid people who smoke or places that allow cigarette smoking. If it’s not possible to avoid smokers, educating them on the risk to you and themselves may convince them to drop the habit for good.

# 7: Being Overweight

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/hamburger-p-french-fries-belly-2683042/>)

Most people don’t associate cancer with being overweight or obese. Being overweight is more often associated with diabetes or heart disease. However, about 8% of all cancers can be attributed to being overweight or obese, so losing weight can help you lower the risk of getting a variety of cancers, including liver cancer, pancreatic cancer, kidney cancer, breast cancer, and more.

“Body weight plays a role in inflammation, changes in hormone levels, and can affect biochemicals in your body like insulin,” says Gapstur. Luckily, losing weight immediately reduces the risk of these types of cancer. It also increases your rate of survival, should you be diagnosed.

# 8: Getting Your Nails Done

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/people-hands-manicure-cuticle-2583493/>)

With the rise in conscientious consumerism, many customers know that nail polishes traditionally contain cancer-causing compounds. Chemicals like triphenyl phosphate, toluene, and dibutyl phthalate can all cause cancer or birth defects.

The danger of getting your nails done doesn’t just impact clients, however. Manicurists are also at increased risk of being diagnosed with multiple myeloma. If you’re a manicurist or simply love getting your nails done, make sure to only go to salons that provide gloves and masks. Check for proper ventilation as well!

# 9: Drinking Tap Water

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/tap-black-faucet-kitchen-sink-791172/>)

It’s long been understood that unfiltered tap water can be dangerous to your health. From Erin Brokovich’s exposure of chromium-6 in Hinkley, CA to the ongoing saga of Flint, MI, tap water and the potential compounds it contains have been in the news a lot. And while most tap water goes through some sort of filtration before coming to your house, that doesn’t mean it’s safe.

In addition to chromium-6, you can find arsenic, disinfection byproducts, nitrates and more lurking in your water supply. The best option is to invest in your own water filter, whether through a pitcher or by installing a secondary filtration system in your home. You should also regularly check to see what chemicals may be in your tap water.

# 10: Inactivity

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/feet-socks-living-room-person-932346/>)

Many adults work sedentary jobs, sitting at a desk for eight or more hours every day. But the ACS recommends adults get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity every week, spread out over several days. If you’re not getting activity, you’re in danger of getting colon cancer, breast cancer, or endometrial cancer. There are other cancers you’ll also be at higher risk of getting, including liver, myeloma, and kidney cancer.

However, increasing the activity in your life can help improve your immune system, reduce inflammation, and lower the levels of certain growth factors that have been associated with cancer development and progression. So going on a walk every day, riding a bike, or taking a dip in a pool can help you lose weight and improve your health!

# 11: Working The Late Shift

(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-using-machine-during-nighttime-162573/>)

The connection between sleep and cancer is still a developing field of research, but several studies have indicated that there’s a link between poor sleep and increased cancer risk. People with circadian rhythm disorders may have a higher rate of breast and prostate cancer.

Those most commonly at risk for sleep disorders include people who work in overnight or graveyard shifts. Night nurses, third shift workers, and people who work split shifts that may disrupt sleep cycles are in danger of increased cancer risk. If possible, avoid working a job that requires odd hours; when that’s not possible, try to ensure that you’re getting regular sleep, even if it’s not at night.

# 12: Radon Exposure

(<https://www.rd.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/shutterstock_1103729561.jpg>)

Not many people know about the danger of radon exposure. Radon is a radioactive gas found naturally in the air, soil, and water, and is carcinogenic in concentrated amounts. Radon is a naturally occurring gas, and some parts of the country deal with higher rates. Some building materials can also emit radon.

Luckily, you can easily test for radon by purchasing a testing kit or working with a radon professional. Generally speaking, reducing radon in your home is a fairly straightforward process, and you can contact your state radon office for a list of professionals that are available to help.

# 13: Getting Your Clothes Dry-Cleaned

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/shop-street-city-outdoors-1596551/>)

When you’re preparing for a special event, you want to look your best. For many people, that means getting your outfit dry-cleaned so that you know it’s truly stunning. However, most dry cleaning processes use a chemical called “perc,” which is a known health hazard. If you work in a dry cleaner or regularly get your shirts starched and pressed, you may be at higher risk for esophagus, kidney, and bladder cancer.

If you absolutely must dry clean your clothes, try to minimize how often you do so. Since it’s regular exposure to the chemical that increases your risk of getting these cancers, infrequent dry-cleaning shouldn’t be an issue.

# 14: HPV

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/couple-making-out-young-people-731890/>)

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the single most commonly sexually transmitted infection, and many people with HPV don’t develop any symptoms. However, even without exhibiting symptoms, people with HPV have an increased risk of developing several different types of cancer. The ACS estimates that over 31,000 men and women are diagnosed with HPV-caused cancers every year.

If you don’t have HPV, getting the Gardasil vaccination can protect against infections. If you’re over 26, however, the vaccine may not be effective. In that case, it’s very important to get screened regularly if you’re sexually active and seek treatment if you are diagnosed with precancerous cell changes.

# 15: Eating Processed Meat

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/cold-cuts-salami-speck-cheese-1280421/>)

Bacon, hotdogs, lunchmeat - nearly everyone loves processed meats. But research shows that eating any processed meat increases the risk of both stomach and colorectal cancers. Processed meats are generally made with nitrates and nitrates, which can form nitrosamines when heated. These carcinogenic compounds can build up and cause issues.

You can look for nitrite- and nitrate-free selections of processed meat. You can also save your consumption of processed meats like bacon and sausage for special occasions. But overall, it’s best to avoid eating processed meat entirely if at all possible.

# 16: Drinking Overly Hot Beverages

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/teacup-cup-of-tea-tee-drink-hot-2324842/>)

Many people start their days off with hot coffee or tea, especially in the winter. Hot chocolate, cider, and other hot drinks are often shared at social occasions, and people don’t think twice about partaking. But beverages served over 140 degrees F can elevate your risk of esophageal cancer.

Dr. James Doidge, a senior research associate at University College London, says “It doesn’t take a scientist to appreciate that repeated irritation of any body surface increases your risk of cancer...many foods and drinks contribute to the risk of gastrointestinal cancers.” Most hot commercial beverages are served at between 140-160 degrees F. To reduce your risk, let the drink cool before taking your first sip.

# 17: Heating Takeout Containers

(<https://www.rd.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/shutterstock_1152026654.jpg>)

If you’ve ever reheated your takeout in the container it came in, you may have put yourself at risk of exposure to styrene. Styrene is used in the creation of a variety of things, including many types of food containers. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to this chemical can increase your risk of cancers like leukemia and lymphoma, as well as cancer of your pancreas or esophagus.

While most people will only experience the potential of styrene exposure through food containers, people who work in fabrication can also be exposed. At home, you can limit your risk of exposure by simply transferring your takeout to a standard plate or bowl!

# 18: Eating Red Meat

(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/photo-of-person-holding-raw-meat-1869711/>)

Like processed meat, red meat can also contain nitrates and nitrites. But even without these compounds, the process of cooking and eating red meat can expose you to other cancer-causing compounds, like heterocyclic amines (HCAs) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). When you grill a steak or cook a burger over an open flame, these compounds are created. And as mutagenic compounds, they can change your DNA in ways that can increase your cancer risk.

The American Institute of Cancer Research recommends eating less than 18 ounces of red meat per week to avoid increasing your risk of colorectal cancer. Lower your consumption of burgers and other red meat, including pork and lamb, and try subbing in meatless meals.

# 19: Having Unprotected Sex

(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/two-people-laying-on-a-bed-covered-with-a-floral-comforter-1246960/>)

Sex has a number of health benefits, like reducing stress and boosting your immune system. However, having unprotected sex also comes with its own dangers. Most notably, having unprotected sex puts you at risk for contracting STIs like HPV and chlamydia, both of which have been linked to increased cancer risk.

Because both of these STIs can have subtle symptoms - or none at all - it’s important to be regularly tested if you are engaging in unprotected sex. The easiest way to prevent exposure to these STIs is, of course, using protection.

# 20: Gardening

(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/person-sitting-beside-white-petaled-flowers-1537006/>)

If you love to garden, you probably hate weeds. But unfortunately, if you choose to take care of those weeds with weedkiller, you’re putting yourself in danger. Glyphosate, the most commonly used weedkiller, has been shown to be carcinogenic to humans.

To keep your garden looking gorgeous without using harmful chemicals, consider turning to natural methods of weed control. Shade the soil around your plants, be careful about what types of compost you use, and make sure to pull up the entire plant when weeding by hand. Using a few simple tricks will help both you and your garden thrive.

# 21: Eating Trans Fats

(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/closeup-photo-of-doughnuts-1191639/>)

While trans fats have been banned, they can still turn up in your food. Trans fats are man-made fats that can increase your risk of breast, colon, and prostate cancer. Women with the highest levels of trans fats had double the risk of developing breast cancer as women with the lowest levels.

Common foods that may still contain trans fats include snack foods like frozen pizza and microwave popcorn, fast foods, margarine and shortening, and ready to use frostings. The best way to avoid eating trans fats is to check the label and ingredients. If a product says it contains partially hydrogenated oils, don’t eat it!

# 22: Exposure to Air Pollution

(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/photography-of-factory-929385/>)

It’s no secret that air pollution is dangerous. Many components of air pollution have already been classified as carcinogens, but for the first time, the International Agency for Research on Cancer has classified outdoor air pollution as a whole as a cancer-causing agent. Particulate matter - a major part of outdoor air pollution - can increase the risk of lung and bladder cancer.

While we can’t just breathe less, we can still take action to protect ourselves and future generations. By supporting higher regulatory standards on industries that cause the most pollution and standing behind clean energy and improved mass transit, you can help work to reduce the risk of air pollution.

# 23: Inherited Risk

(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/affection-baby-baby-girl-beautiful-377058/>)

One of the things we can’t change is who our parents are, but that can mean an increased risk of certain types of cancer. The most common cancer associated with inherited gene mutations is breast cancer, which develops from the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes. These gene mutations can also increase the risk of ovarian cancer in women, as well as pancreatic and prostate cancers.

While you can’t prevent these inherited gene mutations, knowledge is the key. Make sure to study your family history for increased instances of breast, ovarian, and other cancers. Check yourself regularly, both through self-screening and the appropriate procedures at your doctor. Taking preventative measures early and often can reduce your risk of developing these cancers.

# 24: Asbestos Exposure

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/caution-sign-asbestos-rust-3789325/>)

People have known about the danger of asbestos for years, but older buildings - like schools, older homes, or older public buildings - may still put you at risk of exposure. Inhaling asbestos can cause mesothelioma, a rare, aggressive form of cancer that doesn’t have a cure.

Insulation, fireproofing products, older consumer products, and construction materials all have the potential to contain asbestos. If you live in an older home, make sure to have it checked by an asbestos professional. If you’re concerned that your workplace may put you at risk of exposure, speak to your HR department or another person in charge to arrange an inspection.

# 25: Eating Fermented Foods

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/kimchi-food-republic-of-korea-2390565/>)

While fermented foods can have a number of health benefits, there’s increasing reason to believe that some fermented foods can increase your risk of nasopharyngeal carcinoma. Much like processed meats, some fermented foods contain high amounts of nitrates and nitrites, which react with proteins in your body to form nitrosamines.

We’re not suggesting you cut fermented foods out of your life completely, especially since the probiotics they provide can be beneficial to gut health. However, be mindful of how much you’re eating, and check ingredient lists if you’re not making your own. Eating a balanced diet that includes fermented foods like pickles, sauerkraut, or kimchi as a treat should be safe.

# 26: Chewing Tobacco

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/sting-free-snuff-snuff-portion-snus-3799107/>)

Some people view chewing tobacco as a safer alternative to smoking cigarettes, but smokeless tobacco can be just as harmful to your health. In addition to containing higher amounts of nicotine, oral tobacco contains at least 28 chemicals known to cause cancer.

If you use any smokeless tobacco, you’re at a higher risk of mouth cancer, stomach cancer, esophageal cancer, and more. You may also be at increased risk of heart disease, heart attacks, and stroke. It’s important to quit using chewing tobacco as soon as possible to reduce your risk of getting painful cancer.

# 27: Having Diabetes

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/diabetes-blood-finger-glucose-777002/>)

Bad news - having either type 1 or type 2 diabetes can put you at a higher risk for cancer. Women with diabetes are at a higher risk than men; they’re 27% more likely to develop cancer, while men are only 19% more likely.

While there is no cure for type 1 diabetes, you can reverse type 2 diabetes through diet changes and weight loss. Maintaining a normal blood sugar level with both type 1 and type 2 diabetes can help reduce your risk. Scientists believe that consistent high blood sugar may trigger the DNA mutations that can increase the danger, so work with your doctor to manage your blood sugar.

# 28: Radiation Exposure

(<https://www.rd.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/shutterstock_635432888.jpg>)

This one seems fairly obvious. Exposure to high amounts of radiation is dangerous and can damage your tissues. But even frequent exposure to small amounts of radiation can, over time, be hazardous to your health. And radiation can come from unexpected places, like your TV, cell phone, or even your car.

While the people at highest risk are those who work around radiation every day, it’s important to monitor your radiation exposure and limit it when you can. Try to stay out of the sun and protect yourself from UV light. If you’re pregnant, older, or have a compromised immune system, it’s especially important to protect yourself from radiation.

# 29: Exposure to Diesel Exhaust

(<https://pixabay.com/photos/diesel-fuel-gauge-petrol-stations-1122312/>)

Diesel fuel is a popular fuel for large engines, including trucks, buses, trains, and more. Unfortunately, while these vehicles offer benefits like better fuel economy and a more rugged engine that requires less maintenance, they also belch over 30 different types of carcinogens into the air.

Diesel exhaust is conclusively linked to lung cancer, and may put you at higher risk for esophageal cancer, stomach cancer, and more. If you drive a personal vehicle fueled by diesel, it may be time to consider switching. If you have to drive a diesel-powered vehicle for work, limit the time you spend around your vehicle while it’s running, and ask your employer about a personal respirator

# 30: Gene Mutations

(<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/dna-biology-medicine-gene-163466/>)

In addition to inherited gene mutations, certain activities during your life can cause gene mutations. Sun exposure, for instance, causes mutations in your genes that can lead to skin cancer Some gene mutations occur as errors made by DNA, which are linked to up to 10% of all cancer diagnoses.

To reduce your risk of cancer because of genetic mutation, try to avoid activities that may cause issues and make sure that you’re checking your body regularly. While you can’t prevent genetic mutation, catching cancer early can greatly increase your chances of survival.