

A SNAPSHOT OF

# CANCER AND THE ENVIRONMENT



## What is Cancer?

Cancer is the uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells in the body. Cancer is not a single disease; it is a group of more than 100 different diseases.

## What Causes Cancer?

In most cases, it is not known what causes cancer. Since cancer is not a single disease, it does not have a single cause. There are many different causes (also known as risk factors) that contribute to the development of cancer. These risk factors add up over many years and can combine to increase a person's chance of developing cancer.

Risk factors are different with each type of cancer. They include some things you cannot change like your age, race, gender, and family history. They also include some things you can change. You can decrease or eliminate many cancer risk factors like an unhealthy diet, and exposure to tobacco, alcohol, sunlight and certain cancer-causing chemicals often found in the environment, and routine cancer screening for breast (mammogram), cervical (Pap test), and colo-rectal (colonoscopy) beginning at the appropriate age and intervals.

## What About Toxic Chemicals in the Environment?

Exposure to certain chemicals in the environment, at home, and at work may contribute to a person's risk of developing cancer. These exposures must occur repeatedly to significant amounts of the chemical to cause cancer.

Historically, most exposures to cancer-causing chemicals happen in workplaces where large amounts of toxic chemicals are used. This is why safe work practices, personal protection, ventilation, and other controls are so important in protecting workers from exposure.

The levels of toxic chemicals found in soil, water and air are usually a lot less than the amount of toxic chemicals found in these workplaces. This is why the risk of cancer from exposure to chemicals in the environment is thought to be very low compared to the risk of cancer from exposures in the workplace. In fact, the risk of developing cancer from an environmental source is usually so low that it is very difficult to determine.

## What are the Chances I Will Get Cancer?

The American Cancer Society estimates that in the United States one out of every two men and one out of every three women are at risk of having cancer in their lifetime. After heart disease, cancer is the second leading cause of death in Georgia.

## What About All the Cancer Cases in My Neighborhood?

Since cancer is so common, it is not unusual to see many cases of cancer in a single community or neighborhood, especially if the community is aging. About 77% of all cancers are diagnosed at ages 55 and older.

Public concern about environmental cancer risks often focus on chemicals that are not known to cause cancer or with exposures at such low levels that there is very minimal risk. Among the various environmental factors, tobacco use, unhealthy diet, and physical inactivity have a greater affect on individual cancer risk than do trace levels of pollutants in soil, water, and air.

## What About Cancer and Children?

The most common cancers in children are leukemia (cancer of the blood) lymphoma (cancer of the immune system), and brain cancer. Although some childhood cancers are related to family history, in most cases, the cause is not known.

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## What can I do to decrease my risk of getting cancer?

- Stop smoking and avoid tobacco products
- Avoid staying in the sun unprotected for long periods of time
- Follow a healthy diet including lots of fruits and vegetables, and low fat and high fiber foods
- Limit alcohol consumption
- Avoid excessive weight gain
- Consult your doctor or health care provider about any unusual changes in your body
- Regularly do self exams and take advantage of cancer screening tests
- Be aware of the chemicals in the products you buy for your home (i.e. pesticides, paints, cleaning products, solvents) and those you use on the job
- Read product labels and follow the directions carefully
- Whenever you can, use products that are less toxic. For a list of safe cleaning products, visit [www.health.state.ga.us/programs/hazards/pdfs/alternatives.pdf](http://www.health.state.ga.us/programs/hazards/pdfs/alternatives.pdf)

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Chemical Hazards Program Georgia Division of Public Health | (404) 657-6534  
[www.health.state.ga.us/programs/hazards](http://www.health.state.ga.us/programs/hazards)

Cancer Control Section Georgia Division of Public Health | (404) 657-6611  
[www.health.state.ga.us/programs/cancer](http://www.health.state.ga.us/programs/cancer)

American Cancer Society | (800) ACS-2345  
National Cancer Institute [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

This snapshot was taken from a brochure developed from the American Cancer Society, Cancer Facts & Figures 2002; Georgia Cancer Coalition, Mobilizing Georgia Immobilizing Cancer, and Iowa's Cancer and the Environment fact sheet. Supported in part by funds from the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act trust fund through a cooperative agreement with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Public Health Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.