

# What Is Cancer?

Cancer is a group of diseases that begin in cells, the building blocks that make up our bodies. Normal cells grow and divide to form new cells as the body needs them, and when they get old, they die, and new cells take their place. Sometimes, this orderly process goes wrong. New cells form when the body does not need them, and old cells do not die when they should. These extra cells can form a growth or tumor. Some tumors are cancers. Cancers can spread into neighboring tissues and organs and can spread to distant parts of the body.

## Who is affected by cancer in Connecticut?

- Cancer is the second leading cause of death overall, and the leading cause of death in adults 45 to 84 years of age.
- Approximately 20,000 residents develop cancer every year.
- Nearly 7,000 residents die each year from cancer.
- More than half of new cancer cases are cancers of the breast, prostate, lung, and colon/rectum.
- Cancer risk increases with age. Six out of ten new cancers are found in people 65 years of age and older.
- In 2009, hospitalizations for cancer cost more than \$660 million.

Data Sources: Connecticut Department of Public Health Death Registry, Connecticut Tumor Registry, and Hospitalization Report

## What is the impact of a family history of cancer?

Knowing your family history of cancer is an important part of determining your lifetime risk of developing cancer. About 5% to 10% of all cancers are inherited. This means that genes passed on to you by your parents could make it easier for you to get some kinds of cancer. For example, defects in the genes called BRCA1 and BRCA2 increase the risk of getting breast and ovarian cancers. If your grandmother, mother, sister, or daughter has, or had, breast or ovarian cancer, you are more likely to develop these cancers.

If you know your family history of cancer, you can make decisions that might help to prevent it or find it early, when it is easier to treat. If your close relatives had certain types of cancer, you can be tested to find out if you have inherited defective genes that increase your risk for developing these cancers. Always talk with your doctor to help you decide if genetic testing is right for you.

## What can you do to lower your chances of getting cancer?

At least half of all cancer cases might be avoided or delayed by making lifestyle changes:

- Don't smoke or use tobacco products.
- Eat less fatty and fried foods, sugary foods, beef, pork, and cold cuts.
- Eat more whole grains, fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy foods, fish and poultry.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Get more active. Exercise 30 minutes every day.

## Your Family Health History

Know your past. Act in the present. Protect your future.

- If you drink alcohol, limit your drinking to 1 drink a day (if you're a woman) or 2 drinks a day (if you're a man).
- Use sunscreen when you go outdoors. Avoid tanning beds and sunlamps. They can damage your skin as much as direct sunlight.
- Viruses cause some cancers, such as HPV, which causes about 70% of all cervical cancers. If you are a female between the ages of 9-26 years, talk to your doctor about receiving the HPV vaccine.
- Get screened regularly for cancer. Ask your doctor what tests you need, or see the American Cancer Society's recommendations at [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) (type "guidelines" in the search box).

Data Source: National Cancer Institute, [www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/HPV](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/HPV)

## Cancer Resources:

### **Connecticut Breast & Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program**

[www.ct.gov/dph](http://www.ct.gov/dph)  
(860) 509-7804

### **National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service**

[cis.nci.nih.gov](http://cis.nci.nih.gov)  
1 (800) 4-CANCER

### **American Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)  
1 (800) ACS-2345

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

[www.cdc.gov/cancer](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer)  
1 (800) CDC-INFO

### **FORCE: Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered**

[www.facingourrisk.org](http://www.facingourrisk.org)  
1 (866) 824-RISK