

Special Correspondence

[We are publishing this Special Correspondence to commemorate World Cancer Day on 4th February]

Cancer Awareness — The Basics

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As we observe World Cancer Day, it is important that we remember of the basics of Cancer prevention and management for a better future. Incidence of Cancer is rapidly increasing. It is likely to affect every 4th person by 2030 according to WHO. Even now, awareness of this deadly disease is hardly there especially in rural India. Late-stage presentation and inaccessibility to healthcare services are still common. There are several myths which make things even more complicated. Although at least 50% of cancer is preventable and mostly lifestyle related, not much is done about these preventable factors. Cancer is curable if detected early and treated properly. Hence stress should be put on prevention and early detection through awareness and screening programmes. Access to healthcare should also be there for early and proper treatment.

Only 1 in 5 low and middle income countries have the necessary data to drive cancer policy⁵.

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Key words : Cancer, incidence, lifestyle, screening, awareness, prevention.

Cancer is the second leading cause of death globally, and is responsible for an estimated 9.6 million deaths in 2018. Globally, about 1 in 6 deaths is due to cancer. The incidence of Cancer in India is 94.1 & 103.6/ 100,000 population in males and females respectively. Approximately 70% of deaths from cancer occur in low and middle income countries. The economic impact of cancer is significant and is increasing. The total annual economic cost of cancer in 2010 was estimated at approximately US\$ 1.16 trillion⁴.

Cancer is as old as mankind. It was found in the mummy of Egypt from 5000 years back. Unfortunately, even now, many people are unaware about its nature, its cause, its prevention and most importantly there are several misconceptions which make the problem even more complicated. The incidence of Cancer is increasing. WHO is predicting that in another 10 yrs, almost every family will have a member who is likely to get cancer¹. The only way to escape this ordeal is to know what causes cancer and how we can prevent them. Also, one must seek early medical help so that it can be detected at a very early or even pre-cancerous stage and the cure rate can be very high.

What is Cancer ?

Cancer arises from the transformation of normal cells into tumour cells in a multistage process that generally progresses from a pre-cancerous lesion to a malignant tumour. These changes are the result of the interaction between a person's genetic factors and 3 categories of external agents, including:

- physical carcinogens, such as ultraviolet and ionizing radiation;
- chemical carcinogens, such as asbestos, components of

tobacco smoke, aflatoxin (a food contaminant from moulds), and arsenic (a drinking water contaminant); and

- biological carcinogens, such as infections from certain viruses, bacteria, or parasites.

WHO, through its cancer research agency, International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), maintains a classification of cancer-causing agents.

Ageing is another fundamental factor for the development of cancer. The incidence of cancer rises dramatically with age, most likely due to a build-up of risks for specific cancers that increase with age. The overall risk accumulation is combined with the tendency for cellular repair mechanisms to be less effective as a person grows older.

What are the Common Types of Cancer ?

In male, where tobacco addiction is a common problem, the common cancers are that of oral cavity, lung and prostate. In females, in rural population the common cancer is that of uterine cervix, whereas that of urban women it is breast cancer.

The most common cancers are:

- Lung (2.09 million cases)
- Breast (2.09 million cases)
- Colorectal (1.80 million cases)
- Prostate (1.28 million cases)
- Skin cancer (non-melanoma) (1.04 million cases)
- Stomach (1.03 million cases)

The most common causes of cancer death are cancers of:

- Lung (1.76 million deaths)
- Colorectal (862 000 deaths)
- Stomach (783 000 deaths)
- Liver (782 000 deaths)
- Breast (627 000 deaths)

What are the symptoms of cancer?

1. General symptoms :

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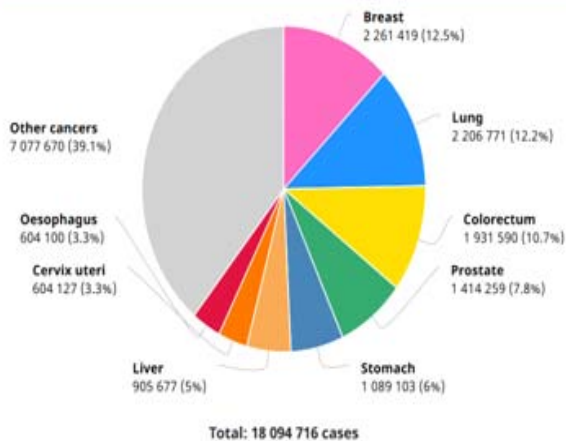
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All cancers excl. non-melanoma skin cancer

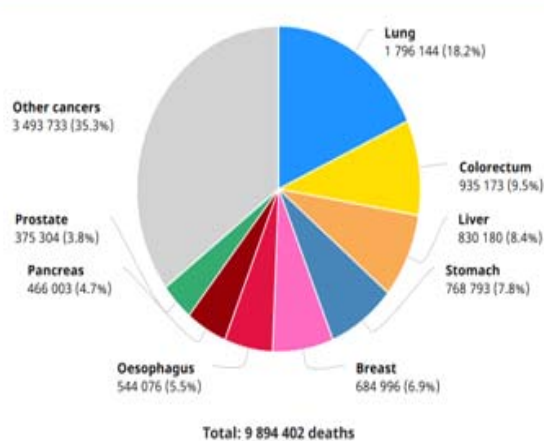
Source: Globocan 2020



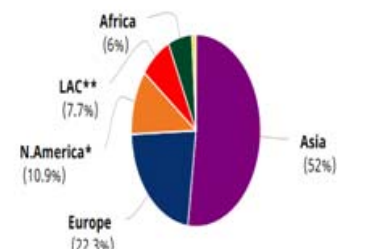
Number of new cases in 2020, both sexes, all ages



Number of deaths in 2020, both sexes, all ages

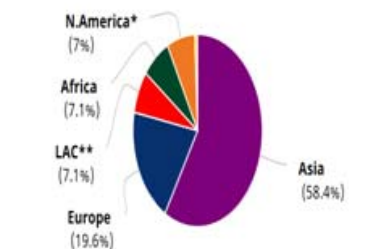


Incidence, both sexes



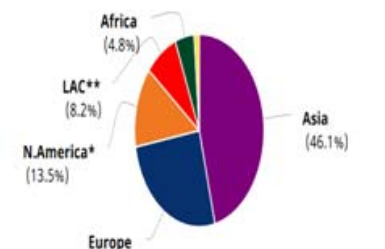
Region	Population	Number
Asia	9 416 670	
Europe	4 042 263	
*Northern America	1 970 287	
**Latin America and the Caribbean	1 398 955	
Africa	1 082 172	
Oceania	184 369	
Total	18 094 716	

Mortality, both sexes



Region	Population	Number
Asia	5 781 666	
Europe	1 942 552	
**Latin America and the Caribbean	705 349	
Africa	702 827	
*Northern America	693 889	
Oceania	68 119	
Total	9 894 402	

5-year prevalence, both sexes



Region	Population	Number
Asia	20 330 347	
Europe	11 543 503	
*Northern America	5 948 450	
**Latin America and the Caribbean	3 609 033	
Africa	2 100 371	
Oceania	559 698	
Total	44 091 402	

Loss of appetite and body weight, weakness, anaemia (as the rapidly multiplying cancer cells take away all the nutrition and also for decreased appetite and recurrent bleeding).

2. Local symptoms:

A new lump which suddenly appears and rapidly increases in size.

An ulcer which is not healing, increasing and bleeding.

Symptoms will also depend on the site of cancer.

Cancer in the lung : will cause persistent cough which may be associated with haemoptysis

That of the Larynx : persistent hoarseness, stridor

Oesophagus : increasing difficulty in swallowing solids and later liquids also.

Breast : Lump (initially painless), skin changes, bleeding from the nipple

Stomach : anorexia, anaemia, asthenia, haemoptysis, melaena

Uterus : intermenstrual bleeding, bleeding after coitus, postmenopausal bleeding

Urinary bladder or kidney- haematuria

Colo-rectum- bleeding with stool (fresh/ altered), change in bowel habit.

Leukaemia- common symptoms are recurrent fever, anaemia, bruising and bleeding that fail to stop even after minor injuries.

What are the Causes of Cancer ? How We Can Prevent Them?

Unfortunately, the causes in 50% of all cancers are still not clear, and several researches are going on worldwide to determine this. In nearly half of the cases, the causes are proved beyond doubt- of which the most important is **tobacco** in any form- smoking (Bidi, cigarette, hukka etc.) and smokeless (paan, paan masala, ghutka, khaini, jarda etc.)².

Around one third of deaths from cancer are due to the 5 leading behavioral and dietary risks: high body mass index, low fruit and vegetable intake, lack of physical activity, tobacco use, and alcohol use.

Tobacco use is the most important risk factor for cancer and is responsible for approximately 50% of cancer deaths in men & 25% in women. Tobacco has nearly 4800 chemicals of which at least 69 are known to be carcinogenic. It causes 1 death every 6 seconds and kills 1 million people every year globally and WHO predicts that the number is going to cross 2 millions by 2030. Not only the people who smoke actively are at risk but also the people around, through passive smoking. It is known to cause Heart attacks, stroke, bronchitis, different cancers, depression along with many other medical ailments.

The common cancers that are caused by tobacco are that of Oral cavity, Larynx, Oesophagus, Lungs, Stomach, Pancreas, Urinary bladder, Uterine cervix, Prostate and kidney.

Active & Passive smoking are equally dangerous.

The Tobacco addicts should have strong determination to quit tobacco. The addiction is mostly because of one of its thousands of toxic components called Nicotine for which a person becomes dependent both mentally and physically. Nicotine chewing gums/ patch³ which are available should be used when there is craving for tobacco. It alone is much less toxic and this can also be gradually stopped over a few weeks. Fortunately the risks of a tobacco addict comes down significantly within 10 yrs after stoppage of tobacco consumption, especially if they quit before the age of 45 years. So it is never too late.

Diet and Body Weight :

The other less common causative agents are **diet** (adulterated food, too much of junk food, high fat, red meat, stored and charred/ smoked food). About 40 prospective studies have shown that there is 20% increased risk of having Colo-rectal cancer on eating 50 grams of processed meat daily, may be to do with the added nitrates in processed meat^{4,5}. While diet and weight loss are central for cancer prevention, combining a good diet with other healthy habits can further lower the risk, according to a study in the May 2016 issue of *JAMA Oncology*.

Harvard researchers examined four main lifestyle areas that are associated with health status: smoking, drinking, weight, and exercise. They looked at 46,000 men over 26 years and classified

about 12,000 as a low-risk group because they engaged in defined healthy behavior in all four areas—they did not smoke, drank moderate amounts of alcohol (no more than two servings per day), had a body mass index of 18.5 to 27.5, and engaged in 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week.

When they compared these men with others who did not meet these standards, the researchers discovered that men could avert or delay 67% of cancer deaths and prevent 63% of new malignancies each year. In terms of specific cancers, men could reduce incidence of bladder cancer by 62%, prostate cancer by 40%, and kidney cancer by 36%.

It is therefore imperative to have healthy diet which includes ample amount of fresh fruits, vegetables and plenty of water. Moderate amount of fish, eggs and chicken are not harmful. Onion, garlic, turmeric, spinach, carrots, tomatoes, green tea are supposed to carry Anti-oxidants which can prevent cancer to certain extent. Avoid heating food in plastic containers like that in Microwave.

A 2014 study in the Lancet found that higher body mass index increases the risk of developing some of the most common cancers. Scientists discovered that among five million people studied, a gain of 34 pounds was linked with a 10% increase in the risks of cancers of colon, gall bladder, kidney and liver. Obesity is also associated with cancers of GE junction (for increased reflux) and breast.

Aflatoxins, produced by molds and commonly found in countries with high humidity and high temperature, can cause Liver cancer- especially Aflatoxin B1, B2, G1, G2. Hence, stored and contaminated foods, especially Grains and peanuts, should be avoided.

Virus :

For uterine cervical cancer the common causes are early and multiple children, multiple partners, low personal hygiene, infection by Human Papilloma Virus which is usually sexually transmitted. Young women should consider having Vaccine against this virus which can give them 90% life time protection against this very common cancer in India. Currently the recommended age for vaccination is 9 yrs to 26 yrs. Women above 30 yrs should have annual Pap smear to look for pre-cancerous cells which, if found, can be treated with nearly 100% cure. Approximately 15% of cancers diagnosed in 2012 were attributed to carcinogenic infections, including Helicobacter pylori, Human papillomavirus (HPV), Hepatitis B virus, Hepatitis C virus, and Epstein-Barr virus³.

- Hepatitis B and C virus and some types of HPV increase the risk for liver and cervical cancer, respectively. Infection with HIV substantially increases the risk of cancers such as cervical cancer. Cancer causing infections, such as hepatitis and human papilloma virus (HPV), are responsible for up to 25% of cancer cases in low- and middle-income countries³. Epstein- Barr Virus can cause Burkitt's Lymphoma, cancer of Nasopharynx and may also be associated with cancers of stomach.

Sunlight :

The most beneficial effect of sun exposure is the production of vitamin D in the skin. Recent evidence suggests that most cells in

the body not only have a vitamin D receptor but also have the capacity to convert 25-hydroxyvitamin D to 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D. Once formed 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D can inhibit cellular proliferation, induce cellular maturation, inhibit angiogenesis and ultimately cause apoptosis to prevent malignancy. A multitude of studies have associated improved vitamin D status with decreased risk for developing several deadly cancers including colon, breast, pancreatic and ovarian cancers. Patients with cancer are at high risk for vitamin D deficiency. Sensible sun exposure, vitamin D fortification and vitamin D supplementation should be encouraged to improve the vitamin D status of children and adults not only for bone health but for reducing risk of developing and dying of cancer. The goal is to achieve a blood level of 25-hydroxyvitamin D of 40-60 ng/mL (especially in the white race). Arsenic and Industrial wastes in soil and water can cause skin cancer⁸. There is no doubt that solar ultraviolet (UV) exposure is the most important environmental risk factor for the development of non-melanoma skin cancer especially in white races where there is absence of protective Melanin in the skin. Therefore, sun protection is of particular importance to prevent these malignancies, especially in risk groups. Well-balanced recommendations on sun protection have to ensure an adequate vitamin D status, thereby protecting people against adverse effects of strict sun protection without significantly increasing the risk of developing UV-induced skin cancer⁹.

Air Pollution :

Exposure to outdoor air pollution poses an urgent public health challenge worldwide because it is ubiquitous, affecting everyone, and has numerous serious adverse human health effects, including cancer. Major primary air pollutants, those emitted directly into the environment largely as a result of combustion of fossil and biomass fuels, include gaseous pollutants (such as sulfur dioxide [SO₂], nitrogen dioxide [NO₂], carbon monoxide [CO], and volatile organic compounds [VOCs]) and particulate matter (PM) (including carbonaceous aerosol particles, such as black soot). Although CO levels are often low outdoors in the developed world today (because of the use of emission controls such as catalytic converters on automobiles), high levels can be experienced near biomass burning sources, including wildfires. In addition, secondary air pollutants are formed in the atmosphere from primary pollutants and include gaseous ozone (O₃), a major component of photochemical smog, formed in the atmosphere when nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and hydrocarbons such as VOCs react in the presence of sunlight. Similarly, particulate sulfate (eg, sulfuric acid [H₂SO₄]) and nitrate (eg, ammonium nitrate [NH₄NO₃]) aerosols are commonly created in the atmosphere from SO₂ and NO_x, respectively. Primary combustion particles and secondary particles are small in diameter and are often referred to as fine particulate matter, or PM_{2.5} (particles = 2.5 μm in aerodynamic diameter). Submicron combustion-related PM_{2.5} is of particular health concern because it contains numerous toxic compounds (eg, acids and heavy metals), and can penetrate deeper into the lung than the larger PM generated by

natural processes, such as most windblown soil particle mass⁴.

Genetic: Only 5% of all cancers are genetic (hereditary). If more than 1 member in the family had cancer (esp that of breast, ovary, colo-rectal, prostate and retinoblastoma), the family members should get genetic testing done.

Hereditary Breast and Ovarian Cancer (HBOC) syndrome: In some families, many women develop breast cancer and/or ovarian cancer. Often these cancers are found in women who are younger than the usual age these cancers are found, and some women might have more than one cancer (such as breast cancer in both breasts, or both breast and ovarian cancer). This is known as Hereditary Breast and Ovarian Cancer syndrome (HBOC).

Most often, HBOC is caused by an inherited mutation in either the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene. (Some families have HBOC based on cancer history, but don't have mutations in either of these genes. Scientists believe that there might also be other genes that can cause HBOC.)

The risk of breast and ovarian cancer is very high in women with mutations in either BRCA1 or BRCA2, but it tends to be higher with BRCA1 mutations. Along with breast and ovarian cancer, this syndrome can also lead to fallopian tube cancer, primary peritoneal cancer, male breast cancer, pancreatic cancer, and prostate cancer, as well as some others. Male breast cancer, pancreatic cancer, and prostate cancer can be seen with mutations in either gene, but are more common in people with BRCA2 mutations. In the US, mutations in the BRCA genes are more common in people of Ashkenazi Jewish descent than in the general population.

Women with a strong family history of breast cancer and/or ovarian cancer may choose to undergo genetic counseling to help estimate their risk for having a mutation in one of the BRCA genes. The genetics professional can estimate the risk based on a patient's history of cancer and the history of cancer in their family. If they have a high risk, they might choose to be tested (see Understanding Genetic Testing for Cancer). If a mutation is present, the woman has a high risk of developing breast cancer and ovarian cancer (as well as some other cancers). She can then consider steps to find cancer early and even lower her risk of getting cancer in the form of prophylactic surgeries like Bilateral Mastectomies and Bilateral Salpingo-oophorectomies.

Because breast cancer is rare in men, men with this cancer are often offered genetic counseling and testing for BRCA mutations. Although having a mutation is less likely to affect a man's future health than it is a woman's, it can affect his risk of some cancers, such as prostate and pancreatic cancer. It can also be helpful for a man's close relatives to know that he has a mutation and that they might be at risk.

If someone has a BRCA mutation, it means that their close relatives (parents, siblings, and children) have a 50% chance of having a mutation, too. They may wish to be tested for the mutation, or even without testing may wish to start screening for certain cancers early or take other precautions to lower their risk of cancer.

Lynch syndrome (hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer)

The most common inherited syndrome that increases a person's risk for colon cancer is Lynch syndrome, also called hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC). People with this syndrome are at high risk of developing colorectal cancer. Most of these cancers develop before they are 50.

Lynch syndrome also leads to a high risk of endometrial cancer, as well as cancers of the ovary, stomach, small intestine, pancreas, kidney, brain, ureters (tubes that carry urine from the kidneys to the bladder), and bile duct.

Lynch syndrome can be caused by a mutation in any of several mismatch repair (MMR) genes, including MLH1, MSH2, MSH6, PMS1, and PMS2. These genes are normally involved in repairing damaged DNA. When one of these genes isn't working, cells can develop mistakes in their DNA, which might lead to other gene mutations and eventually cancer.

Asbestos : It is known to cause lung cancer, mesothelioma, cancer of the larynx and ovary, and asbestosis (fibrosis of the lungs) [10].

Controversial : Plastic containers & Microwave:

There has been some concern that food may absorb plasticizers, the substances used in plastic containers and wraps to make them more flexible. Many people are especially concerned about microwaving at high temperatures or heating fatty or oily foods like cheese and meat. General recommendations from Canadian Cancer Society on how to safely store and reheat food:

- Use glass, ceramic and plastic containers and plastic wrap that are labelled as microwave safe. Always follow the instructions on the label when you use microwave-safe containers to heat food.
- Never heat or store food in plastic containers that were not intended for food. Single-use containers, like margarine tubs, tend to warp or melt in the microwave. This may allow more of the substances in the plastic to leach into the food.
- Let food cool before adding it to a plastic container, then put it in the fridge immediately. Avoid plastics that are visibly damaged or stained or have a bad smell.

Microwaves, generally are not found to cause any health hazard like cancers as shown in different studies.

How to diagnose Cancer ?

Any symptom like loss of appetite, unexplained weight loss, anaemia, change in bowel habits, change in voice, bleeding from any normal passage, which is persisting and not responding to standard treatment, should be seen by a Specialist and appropriate tests should be done. Depending upon the symptoms, the tests are ordered. Common tests that are done are- Blood, Stool & Urine tests, Chest X-ray, USG & sometimes CT scan of the abdomen, Endoscopy, Mammography etc. Good Clinical examination by a specialist doctor and appropriate tests lead to a quick diagnosis. Biopsies are often ordered to confirm a suspicion before advising any treatment.

What are the Treatments of Cancer ?

Surgery (by removing the tumour along with a chunk of normal

tissue and local glands) is the gold standard in Early stage of most of the cancers. Additional treatment in the form of Radiotherapy and Chemotherapy may be needed in more advanced cases. Treatment with Hormones are also important for cancers of Breast and Prostate. New Oral tablets (Targeted therapies) have come up recently which work very well for certain cancers of Breast, Lungs, Kidney, Colon & rectum. Immunotherapy is the new form of therapy which boosts the immunity of an individual which in turn can kill the cancer cells.

What are the chances of Cure ?

If detected early, cancer has high chance of cure. In general, for most cancers following are the chances of being cured (usually expressed as 10 yr survival, as other diseases can be a cause of fatality after that) :

Stage I- 90%

Stage II- 60%

Stage III (locally advanced)- 30- 40%

Stage IV (Metastatic disease)- 2- 5%. With modern medicines (targeted therapies, available in the form of tablets), people nowadays can live much longer even with advanced metastatic disease.

Hence it is very important to have general awareness of early signs & symptoms of cancer and to do proper tests early so that the chances of cure can be high.

Conclusion:

Here are some pictures to show how Breast Self Examination (BSE) should be done (Steps 1-4):

Any abnormality that is found during the examination should be checked by a Specialist. Most of the times the findings would be of benign problems, but there is a small possibility of that being sinister. Nowadays, Breast can be conserved in most cases without much of increased risk in early stage cancers. Doctors usually discuss the options before surgery.

Reducing the Cancer Burden :

Cancer is preventable by avoiding the risk factors especially tobacco in any form⁵.

Young women should consider having Vaccine for Viruses causing Cervical cancer. Screening tests may be considered in women over the age of 40 like Annual Pap smear to detect Uterine cancer. Women above the age of 50 yrs should have Mammography (X-rays on breasts) every 3 years.

If Mammography is not available, women should check their breasts once every month esp. after the completion of periods. Those who are post-menopausal should do this once every month on specific dates.

Between 30–50% of cancers can currently be prevented by avoiding risk factors and implementing existing evidence-based prevention strategies. The cancer burden can also be reduced through early detection of cancer and management of patients who develop cancer. Many cancers have a high chance of cure if diagnosed early and treated adequately.



Step 1 — Stand in front of the Mirror with the upper half of the body exposed and compare the sizes of the breasts, any skin change (reddening, appearance like skin of an orange, ulcer, prominent veins), any nipple retraction etc.



Step 2 — Raise your arms. Both breasts should move equally up. If it doesn't it might suggest some problem inside the breast.



Step 3 — Press your hands on your hips. Look for any prominence or dimpling which appears on one side.



Step 4 — Finally lie flat on the bed with a thin pillow behind the head. Place your right hand behind the head. With the flat of the left hand (and not with the finger tips), feel the right breast and right arm pit. Look for any lump or tenderness. Repeat the exercise with opposite hands for the left breast.

Modify and Avoid Risk Factors :

Modifying or avoiding key risk factors can significantly reduce the burden of cancer. These risk factors include:

- tobacco use including cigarettes and smokeless tobacco
- being overweight or obese
- unhealthy diet with low fruit and vegetable intake, intake of stored food
- lack of physical activity
- alcohol use
- sexually transmitted HPV-infection
- infection by hepatitis or other carcinogenic infections
- ionizing and ultraviolet radiation
- urban air pollution
- indoor smoke from household use of solid fuels.
- Exposure to Asbestos, pollutants, industrial chemicals, ionizing radiation.

Tobacco use is the single most important risk factor for cancer and is responsible for approximately 40- 50% of cancer incidence and 22% of cancer-related deaths globally².

Pursue Prevention Strategies :

To prevent cancer, people may:

- increase avoidance of the risk factors listed above;
- vaccinate against HPV and hepatitis B virus;
- control occupational hazards;
- reduce exposure to ultraviolet radiation;
- reduce exposure to ionizing radiation (occupational or medical diagnostic imaging).

- Prophylactic risk reducing surgeries in the presence of mutated genes like prophylactic mastectomies, salpingo-oophorectomies for BRCA, Total colectomy for HNPCC/ FAP.

Vaccination against these HPV and hepatitis B viruses could prevent 1 million cancer cases each year³.

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