

Primary prevention

"An ounce of protection is worth a pound of cure."
English proverb

Tobacco use, alcohol consumption, being overweight or obese and physical inactivity play major roles in the development of cancer. These modifiable risk factors contribute to about two-thirds of all cancers in western countries and at least one-third throughout the world.

The worldwide cancer burden is projected to grow as people in developing countries live longer and increasingly adopt western lifestyles, including higher consumption of saturated fat and calorie-dense foods, and reduced physical activity at work and during leisure time.

About 27 percent of cancers in developing countries and 18 percent worldwide are related to infection. Some of these are preventable through immunization; vaccination against hepatitis B (to prevent liver cancer) is well established, while a vaccine against the human papilloma virus (the cause of cancer of the cervix) is being developed. Anti-retroviral treatment can reduce the risk of AIDS-related cancers in HIV-infected subjects.

Pharmacologic agents can also be useful in cancer prevention (tamoxifen and raloxifene for chemoprevention of breast cancer in high-risk women). Primary prevention efforts that promote smoking cessation, reduction of adolescent smoking, healthy eating habits, physical activity, and UV protection should have high priority in cancer control programmes.

