Department of Community Health

Cancer and Family Health History

What is Cancer?

Cancer is a disease that occurs when cells in the body grow out of control. It can affect any organ tissue in the body. All cancers are caused by a change in one or more genes that control cell division. The cause of the change is not always known. Often it can be linked to exposures in the environment, like smoking. Sometimes, the change occurs in a gene that is passed down from parent to child. Most cancers are caused by a combination of factors that are not always well understood.

Why is Family History Important?

A tendency to develop cancer can run in families. Most cancers happen in people without a known family history but some kinds are inherited.

Look for these "red flags" in your family:

- A family member diagnosed with cancer before 50 years of age
- 3 or more relatives with cancer on one side of the family
- 3 or more generations affected with cancer
- Any family member diagnosed with 2 or more primary cancers (for example: breast and ovarian)
- A male with breast cancer

What Can You Do?

KNOW your family history. Talk to your relatives and find out if anyone has had cancer. Even though you can't change your family history, there are steps you can take that may prevent or delay the onset of disease.

If you have a family history of cancer:

- Tell your health care provider
- Ask if you would benefit from a formal risk assessment and/or genetic counseling
- Ask what screenings are recommended based on your age and family history, then be sure to get them done
- Get more physical activity
- Eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables every day
- Be tobacco free — almost one-third of cancer deaths in 2005 were tobacco related
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Protect your skin from the sun

Cancer cannot always be prevented, but if detected early, there are many new and effective treatments. **If you have been diagnosed with cancer**, share your health history with family members. Encourage them to follow through with screenings and make healthy lifestyle choices to reduce their risk of cancer.

For More Information

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

National Cancer Institute
www.cancer.gov/cancertopics
Live, online help from the National Cancer Institute
cissecure.nci.nih.gov/livehelp/welcome.asp

Michigan's Genetics Resource Center
www.MIGeneticsConnection.org

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