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Fact Sheet: *Cancer Concerns in Communities*

Cancer is more common than many people realize.

According to the American Cancer Society, about 1 out of 2 men and 1 out of 3 women in the United States will develop cancer over their lifetime. As a result, over the years, cancer will affect most households. Because public health and medicine have conquered many infectious diseases, cancer has become the second leading cause of death in the U.S., following heart disease.

The risk of having cancer is strongly related to age.

While cancers occur in people of all ages, incidence rates (the number of newly diagnosed cases of cancer in a specific population during a specific time period) for most types of cancers rise sharply among people who are over 45 years of age. When a community, neighborhood, or workplace consists primarily of people over the age of 45, and particularly over the age of 60, we see many more cancers there than in a community, neighborhood or workplace with more young people.

Cancer is not just one disease.

Cancers are a group of more than 100 diseases that all start with uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells. Different types of cancers have different rates of occurrence and different causes. We cannot assume that all the different types of cancers in a community share a common cause.

More than half of all cancers are related to lifestyle factors.

Cancers may be caused by a variety of factors acting alone or together, usually over a period of many years. Scientists estimate that most cancers are due to lifestyle factors including cigarette smoking, heavy use of alcohol, diet (high fat and low fiber), physical inactivity and overweight or obesity. Other risk factors for some cancers include reproductive patterns, sexual behavior, sunlight exposure, some infectious diseases and some occupational exposures. A family history of cancer may also increase a person's chances of getting a cancer.

Cancers take a long time to develop.

For adults, there is often a long period, 10 to 30 years or even more, between the exposure(s) and the diagnosis of cancer. Since the cancers we see now are generally related to a lifetime of certain habits or exposures to carcinogens, it is usually very difficult to pinpoint what caused a specific case of cancer.

Hazardous substances and cancer.

Most health scientists currently believe that a relatively small proportion of all cancers are related to hazardous substances found in the home, community, or workplace. In order for environmental contaminants to cause cancers, or any other disease, there must be a completed pathway through which the contaminants could travel from their source, through the environment, to enter the human body through air, water, food, or direct contact with the skin. In general, the higher the accumulated exposure to a carcinogenic hazardous substance, the higher the risk of developing cancer years later.

Most cancer clusters occur by chance.

Cancers, and other diseases, do not occur evenly over time and place. Usually increased or decreased rates of cancer are due to random variation, even when high or low rates can be statistically confirmed. Therefore, we can rarely conclude that even a statistically significant increase was caused by exposure to local environmental factors. Additionally, when the numbers of cancer cases are small, it is particularly difficult for statistical analyses or scientific studies to yield useful or valid information.

Cancer cluster inquiries.

Concerns regarding a possible cluster of cancer sometimes occur when someone's family member, neighbor, or co-worker is diagnosed with cancer. This close contact with cancer often brings an awareness of others who also have cancer and may lead to the perception that there are an unusually large number of individuals with cancer in one's community.