



Cancer. It used to be the disease that we talked about in whispers. Now, because so many families are affected, it's a public issue. And it should be.

After all, according to the latest statistics from the cancer agencies and Health Canada, one in 2.6 Canadians will develop cancer over the course of his or her lifetime — four times the rate we saw in the 1930s.

Well, people are living longer. That's the reason, right?

That's part of it, but it's only part. When you adjust the statistics to take an aging population into account, many cancers are still occurring with increasing frequency. And the dramatic increase in cancer in children should be a concern to all of us.

CHILDHOOD CANCERS INCREASING

The latest statistics show a 28 per cent increase in childhood cancers. Obviously that statistic has nothing to do with age. It also has little to do with lifestyle, since the children are not old enough to smoke.

It's clear that the environment around us — the toxic chemicals we're exposed to, the food we eat and the air we breathe — is the major factor in the incidence of cancer today. In fact, the UN's World Health Organization estimates that 80 per cent of cancers worldwide are caused by environmental factors.

A PREVENTABLE DISEASE

The good news with that statistic is that most cancers are potentially preventable. And we can all do something about cancer prevention.

One of the cancers that is being reduced is lung cancer — because over the last 20 years, the number of people who smoke cigarettes has been going down steadily. Cigarettes release as many as 50 known "carcinogens," or cancer causing substances. If you eliminate many people's exposure to those carcinogens, the cancer rate for the overall population goes down. It is one form of effective cancer prevention.

It's not just among smokers, either. The rate of mesothelioma — a kind of cancer directly related to asbestos exposure — has also gone down because we've taken asbestos out of homes and schools and airports and reduced exposure to cancer-causing asbestos among workers.

In the U.S., 15 years ago, the government's Consumer Product Safety Commission ordered manufacturers to label all products containing the carcinogenic chemical methylene chloride so that exposure could be reduced. That action resulted in a 55 per cent reduction in cancers associated with the substance. We need to do the same in Canada.



CANCER FACTS

- In the 1930s, 1 in 10 Canadians could expect to develop cancer over their lifetime
- By the 1970s, the number had risen to 1 in 5
- Today, one in 2.4 Canadian men and 1 in 2.7 Canadian women can expect to develop cancer over their lifetime

– *Cancer Statistics 2002, published by Health Canada and Canadian cancer agencies*

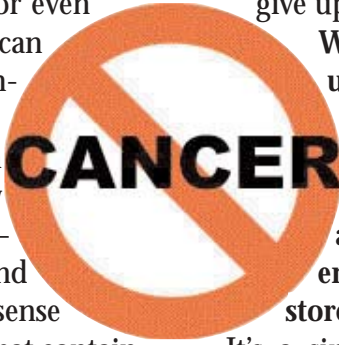
“Cancer prevention has the most potential to improve cancer control ...including reduced environmental and occupational exposure to carcinogens.”

– *Canadian Strategy for Cancer Control, Prevention Working Group, Report 2002*

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We know chemicals cause cancer in the workplace. We also know that by eliminating them, or even by reducing our exposure to them, we can reduce the incidence of occupational cancer.

Many of the same chemicals that can cause cancer in workplace use also show up in ordinary household products — chemicals such as naphthalene, silica and trisodium nitrilotriacetate. It only makes sense that if we stop using household products that contain carcinogenic chemicals, we can reduce the incidence of cancer there as well.



It makes even more sense if we can do it without having to make a lot of big changes in our daily lives or give up cleaning convenience.

We don't have to draw up long lists of unpronounceable chemical names. Nor do we have to resort to using only vinegar, water and baking soda to do our household cleaning. Sometimes, the change is as straightforward as switching to a different product that appears on the same retail store shelf.

It's a simple, effective step that we can all take towards cancer prevention. For ourselves. And our children.

But the amounts are so small...

What if the products we use do happen to contain carcinogens? Aren't they very small amounts?

Some suggest that low doses of toxic chemicals won't affect you as much. In fact, that's the reason that household products aren't required to state what ingredients are in them, even though the same product used in the workplace must disclose ingredients. The theory is that workplace products will be more concentrated or used more often and exposures will be higher, increasing the risk.

SAFE EXPOSURE LEVELS UNKNOWN

For many toxic chemicals that's generally true. But when it comes to carcinogens and endocrine disruptors, scientists don't know at what exposure level a chemical may trigger the cell changes that lead to cancer. They simply don't know what that safe level of exposure is — or even if there is any safe exposure level at all.

In the workplace, occupational health experts will often set what they believe is a safe exposure level for a chemical, only to find later that they need to reduce it drastically. Workers are continuing to show health effects from the chemical — including cancer — at levels far below what they previously thought was safe.

In some cases — for example, lead, which is a carcinogen — the effects are actually more dramatic at lower levels. Dr. Bruce Lanphear of the Children's Hospital Medical Center in Cincinnati reported this year that impairment in children from exposure to lead was actually more severe at low blood levels than it was at higher levels.

SMOKE UNSAFE AT ANY LEVEL

Scientists at UN conferences have also agreed that there is no safe level for second hand smoke from cigarettes, especially for children who are most vulnerable to carcinogens.

Dr. Peter deFur, a toxicologist and affiliate associate professor at Virginia Commonwealth University puts it very clearly: "Scientific research demonstrates the fact that chemicals are biologically active at incredibly low levels — far below anything that might be considered a threshold."

The fact is we don't know if the small amounts of carcinogens and endocrine disrupting chemicals we are exposed to in household products will have the same effect as higher exposures in the workplace. Doesn't it make sense, then, to eliminate them from use — and minimize the risk?



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