

American Cancer Society calls for new strategies to monitor exposure to environmental carcinogens

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A new report from an American Cancer Society scientific advisory subcommittee on cancer and the environment says exposure to carcinogens should be minimized or eliminated whenever feasible, and calls for new strategies to more effectively and efficiently screen the large number of chemicals to which the public is exposed. The report was created as part of an initiative to address ongoing and emerging issues related to environmental pollutants and cancer, and to articulate the American Cancer Society's principles, objectives, and potential roles regarding environmental pollution and cancer prevention.

"The issue of environmental pollutants in air, water, food, and consumer products is one that generates significant public concern and uncertainty," said Jonathan Samet, M.D., chairman of the Department of Preventive Medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of University of Southern California, and co-chair of the committee that authored the report. "With this report, we felt it was important to put environmental pollutants into the broader context of [cancer prevention](#), which includes efforts to reduce tobacco use, improve nutrition, increase physical activity, maintain a healthy body weight, and provide vaccinations against the infections that cause cancer."

"Exposure levels to [environmental pollution](#) to the general public are typically far lower than the levels associated with the proven cancer risks shown in occupational or other settings," said Elizabeth "Terry" T.H.

Fontham, M.P.H., Dr.P.H., national volunteer president of the American Cancer Society and co-chair of the committee. "Nevertheless, these low-level exposures do cause us concern because of the multiplicity of substances, the fact that many exposures are out of the public's control, and the potential that even low-level exposures contribute to the cancer burden when large numbers of people are exposed."

The committee's report notes that the scientific issues regarding environmental exposure are quite complex, as is the growing landscape of technologies used to evaluate chemical carcinogenicity. Despite the value of the current systems for identifying and classifying evidence for carcinogenicity, the report says there are major constraints in implementing them due to both the limited resources allocated to operate these systems and the scientific complexity of the issues themselves.

The position statement on cancer prevention also says:

- New strategies for toxicity testing, including the assessment of carcinogenicity, should be implemented that will more effectively and efficiently screen the large number of chemicals to which people are exposed.
- Occupational and community exposures should meet regulatory standards, and research to identify and reduce carcinogenic hazards should be supported.
- The agencies that set and enforce environmental standards need to be appropriately funded and science-based to keep pace with scientific developments and to update their standards accordingly.
- Although certain exposures are unavoidable, exposure to

carcinogens should be minimized or eliminated whenever feasible.

- The public should be provided with information so that they can make informed choices.
- Communications should acknowledge and not trivialize public concerns, but at the same time should not exaggerate the potential magnitude or level of certainty of the potential risk.

"In developing this new initiative to increase understanding of how exposures to environmental pollutants may affect the risk of various cancers, the ACS will build on its long-term commitment to scientifically based prevention," says the report, adding that "the ACS is committed to exploring these issues further to identify ways in which it can contribute most effectively."

More information: "American Cancer Society Perspectives on Environmental Factors and Cancer," Elizabeth T. H. Fontham, DrPH; Michael J. Thun, MD; Elizabeth Ward, PhD; Alan J. Balch, PhD; John Oliver L. Delancey, MPH; Jonathan M. Samet, MD; on behalf of the ACS Cancer and the Environment Subcommittee, CA Cancer J Clin Published Online: October 28, 2009; [doi:10.3322/caac.20041](https://doi.org/10.3322/caac.20041)

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