

# Public ignorant about key messages concerning diet and cancer

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New research reveals widespread lack of knowledge of the importance of diet and obesity as contributing causes towards the development of cancer.

New research on [public perceptions](#) about cancer reveals that 50-year-old ideas still hold sway while many current [lifestyle](#) messages are not getting through.

On the positive side, however, the vast majority of people now believe cancer is curable.

Experts at the University of Leicester and Leicester's Hospitals carried out the research to assess patients' beliefs about the causes of cancer, which was funded by the Leicestershire-based charity Hope Against Cancer.

The study, published online in the journal *Clinical Oncology*, aimed to compare knowledge about the outcome of cancer treatment and beliefs about the causes of cancer among British South Asian cancer patients and beliefs held by British White cancer patients and the impact of these beliefs upon the patients' mental health.

Between September 2007 and January 2010, 279 patients, who were aware they had cancer, entered the study, funded by Leicestershire-based charity Hope Against Cancer, at the Leicestershire Cancer Centre. Researchers found that:

- Across both groups there was an over emphasis on pollution, stress and injury as causes of cancer
- Almost one quarter of the group believed cancer was caused by injury, reflecting research carried out over half a century ago
- 20% believed that surgery could cause cancer to spread
- Both cohorts believed religion/fate played a part in cancer
- 30% of the group gave credence to alternative medicine being as effective as current clinical procedures
- It was generally accepted that smoking can cause cancer
- There was widespread lack of awareness about the roles [diet](#), [obesity](#) and lack of exercise play in the development of the disease.

The vast majority believed cancer to be curable, with only 10.6% of the British South Asian group and 2.7% of the British White group thinking it was incurable. Out of the total sample, 93% understood the advantages of early screening.

Many of the two groups' assumptions about cancer were held in common. There was widespread over-emphasis on environmental pollution, stress and injury as triggers for cancer. Environmental pollution is a relatively minor cause of cancer, while there is no evidence that stress or injury can cause cancer.

Twenty per cent of the sample believed wrongly that treatment, in particular surgery, caused the cancer to spread and this was a cause of significant depression among British South Asians and anxiety across both groups.

The perceived role of religion in the cause of and recovery from cancer was more prevalent among the British South Asians, though a small cohort of the British White patients had some belief in Fate.

Nearly 30% of the total sample thought alternative treatments could be as effective as surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. This view was held by almost twice as many British South Asian patients as British White patients.

The way patients understand cancer can have a major impact on how they cope with it psychologically. This study is part of a wider investigation with the long-term aim of improving psychological support of cancer patients.

Professor Paul Symonds, of the Department for Cancer Studies and Molecular Medicine at the University of Leicester, commented: “It is clear that there is a continual need for education into the causes of cancer. The good news is that the majority of the sample believed that cancer was curable and screening effective, while 84% appreciated that smoking could cause cancer.

“This shows that some messages are getting through, but we clearly have more work to do in educating the public on the effect of diet and obesity.”

Karen Lord, PhD research student working on the project, said: “It is vital that those diagnosed with cancer have accurate information about treatment options so that they can make informed decisions about their care.

“Myths such as the belief that surgery causes cancer to spread and that alternative treatment is as effective as conventional treatments should be challenged.”

Wendi Stevens, Hope Against Cancer Co-ordinator, added: “This research has highlighted some interesting views relating to cancer. Hope Against Cancer funds a wide range of research looking into treatment, but we believe it is also important to look at cause and education as well in the hope that this knowledge can be used to cut the incidence of [cancer](#) in the future.”

Provided by University of Leicester

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