

Australian study: Better diet, exercise could prevent 43,000 cancers and save \$674 million

March 19 2012, By Justin Norrie



With better diet and exercise, thousands of Australians could avoid cancer.
Credit: AAP/Tracey Nearmy

Governments “must act now” to avert tens of thousands of cancer cases – and millions in medical bills – with policies that will improve diet and exercise among Australians, researchers say.

Scientists from the Viertel Centre for Research in [Cancer](#) Control, at Cancer Council Queensland, estimate that a quarter of all cancer cases

could be prevented if Australians adopted healthier lifestyles.

Using trends in population growth and aging, they forecast that incidence of cancer will rise to about 170,000 in the next 13 years, which is a 60% increase from 2007. Previous research has found that 25% of cancers can be avoided through changes to [diet](#) and [exercise](#) – or about 43,000 cases by 2025.

This would equate to savings in medical costs of \$674 million in that year alone, based on 2000-2001 treatment costs, and ignoring inflation, the researchers said.

Their findings are published in today's issue of the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Associate Professor Peter Baade, the Manager of the Descriptive Epidemiology Research Program at the Viertel Centre for Research in Cancer Control, said that changes to diet and activity would have the greatest impact on bowel cancer, averting an estimated 10,049 cases, and could also prevent 7,273 cases of female breast cancer.

“Latest trend estimates suggest that more of the Australian population is sedentary than ever before, with percentages increasing from 31.5% in 2001 to 35.2% in 2007-08. Similarly, the prevalence of overweight and obesity in adults aged 18 years and over increased from 56.3% in 1995 to 61.4% in 2007-08,” the authors wrote in their paper. They also said that only 8.8% of Australians ate the recommended amount of vegetables – five serves per day.

The figures provided governments with the evidence they needed to act, they said.

“Just over 2% of Australia's total health expenditure in 2007-08 was

spent on preventive services or health promotion. When compared with the costs of treatment, prevention efforts in the area of nutrition and physical activity can be a very cost-effective investment for governments.”

Governments “at all levels must act now, and act vigorously, in order to reduce the significant human and financial burden of cancer in the future”.

In 2010, cancer accounted for [about 19%](#) of Australia’s disease burden, as measured by financial cost, mortality and a range of other factors. Australians pay about [\\$3.8 billion per year](#) in direct health system costs.

Tim Crowe, an Associate Professor in Nutrition at Deakin University, said that cancer was a “big killer of Australians, yet it has a very large preventable component. The lifestyle estimates used in this paper come from the largest ever report into the role of nutrition and physical activity in the prevention of cancer and represent the best quality, most credible and up-to-date source of information available.

“Staying physically active, eating plenty of unprocessed foods high in fibre, drinking alcohol within current guidelines, cutting back on red meat (especially processed meat), and keeping body weight in check, can each dramatically cut a person’s risk of being diagnosed with cancer – especially the most common cancers in Australians of colorectal and breast cancer.

“All of these factors are in an individual’s personal ability to control with any support the government can provide in achieving this goals to be welcomed.”

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Citation: Australian study: Better diet, exercise could prevent 43,000 cancers and save \$674 million (2012, March 19) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-03-australian-diet-cancers-674million.html>

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