

Lifestyle choices behind more than half a million cancers in five years

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Factor	ESTIMATED NUMBER OF CANCER CASES ASSOCIATED WITH THIS FACTOR IN THE UK BETWEEN 2007 AND 2011
Inadequate physical activity	16,500
UV radiation (protecting skin in the sun)	55,900
Alcohol	62,200
Overweight and obesity	88,100
Diet (less meat\salt, more fruit & vegetables\fibres)	144,800
Tobacco	314,600
All the above	587,000

Please note: some cancers are caused by more than one factor, so adding the figures for each individual factor won't result in the total number of cancers caused by these lifestyle factors combined.

Nearly 600,000 cancer cases in the UK could have been avoided in the last five years if people had healthier lifestyles according to new Cancer Research UK figures announced today.

Overall, experts say that more than four in 10 cancers could be prevented by [changes to lifestyle](#). With health services already overstretched and people living longer, prevention is vital to tackle [cancer](#) head on.

Smoking remains by far the biggest preventable cause of cancer in the UK, accounting for more than 314,000 cases in the past five years - nearly a fifth of all cancers. So giving up cigarettes would be the best New Year resolution smokers could make.

But the charity's new figures show a further 145,000 cases could have been prevented if people had eaten a [healthy balanced diet](#) low in red and processed meat and salt, and high in vegetables, fruit and fibre. Keeping a [healthy weight](#) could have prevented around 88,000 cases.

Cutting down on alcohol, protecting skin in the sun and taking more exercise could also have helped prevent tens of thousands of people in the UK developing cancer in the past five years.

Professor Max Parkin, a Cancer Research UK statistician based at Queen Mary University of London ([link is external](#)), whose landmark study formed the basis of these latest figures, said: "There's now little doubt that certain lifestyle choices can have a big impact on [cancer risk](#), with research around the world all pointing to the same key risk factors.

"Of course everyone enjoys some extra treats during the Christmas holidays so we don't want to ban mince pies and wine but it's a good time to think about taking up some healthy habits for 2015. Leading a healthy lifestyle can't guarantee someone won't get cancer but we can stack the odds in our favour by taking positive steps now that will help decrease our cancer risk in future."

Justine Sheils, 43, from Liverpool has had five cancerous moles removed

after regularly using sunbeds in her youth. She said: "We didn't know about the dangers of sunbathing when I was in my teens and twenties, or at least I didn't want to know. I sunbathed on holiday and then used sunbeds to keep my tan topped up all year around, which was the fashion in those days. It wasn't until I noticed a suspicious-looking mole on my chest that I really thought about the risks I was taking.

"Being diagnosed with malignant melanoma gave me one heck of a wakeup call. I've had surgery five times now to remove various moles and I go for check-ups every few months. It's been a truly horrible experience but it did make me think about how I need to overhaul my lifestyle. So I've taken up running, I make sure I'm eating a healthy diet and getting my five fruit and vegetables every day and I've cut back on alcohol. I feel so lucky to have been given a second chance and I wouldn't waste it for the world."

Professor Linda Bauld, Cancer Research UK's expert on cancer prevention, added: "There are more than 200 types of cancer each caused by a complex set of factors - involving both our genes and our lifestyles. There are proven ways to minimise our risk of cancer – like giving up smoking, being more active, drinking less alcohol and maintaining a healthy weight. We must make sure the public and the policy-makers know the evidence behind the benefits of these lifestyle changes is solid."

Harpal Kumar, Cancer Research UK's chief executive, said: "We know that cutting UK smoking rates by just one per cent could save 3,000 lives a year. But changing our habits isn't easy. That's why we've made it a priority to invest in more research so we can learn the best ways to help people make healthier choices to reduce their cancer risk in later life.

"Every year tens of thousands of people in the UK will be diagnosed with preventable cancers unless we act now to help people lead healthier

lives. Alongside investment in health campaigns and ways to help people reduce their risk of cancer, the government urgently needs to take action to stop children starting smoking by introducing standardised packaging for cigarettes without delay. We hope all parliamentary parties will acknowledge that cancer is set to be an ongoing challenge and one which needs careful planning and investment across prevention, diagnosis and treatment."

More information: Parkin DM, Boyd L, Darby SC, Mesher D, Sasieni P, Walker LC. "The Fraction of Cancer Attributable to Lifestyle and Environmental Factors in the UK in 2010." *Br J Cancer* 2011; 105, (S2):Si-S81

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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