

Experts believe lifestyle changes, public health efforts responsible for decrease in cancer deaths

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The American Cancer Society's recent report of a 23-percent decline in the cancer death rate since 1991 can partially be attributed to public health efforts, social change and public policies, such as the abundance of nonsmoking spaces and the tobacco sales tax, Virginia Commonwealth University experts say.

"You can't smoke on airplanes or in restaurants, and those factors have changed the social norms," said Steven Woolf, M.D., professor of family medicine and population health in the VCU School of Medicine and a researcher at VCU Massey Cancer Center in the Cancer Prevention and Control program. "Society has become attuned to the idea that smoking is bad for you."

Additionally, an emphasis on other lifestyle changes, including diet and exercise, helps curb [cancer](#) deaths and other leading causes of death such as heart disease and diabetes. And although 2014 government figures show cancer as the leading cause of death in 21 states including Virginia, increased awareness, research and treatment in low-income and disadvantaged populations will hopefully continue the statistical decline, officials said.

At VCU, initiatives such as Massey Cancer Center's recently completed "Research for Life" fundraising campaign are positioned to continue supporting research discoveries that advance cancer care and educate the

public about lifestyle habits that reduce the risk of the disease. The campaign, which exceeded its \$100 million goal, had as its focus improving Massey's ability to extend and save the lives of people affected by cancer.

That continues to be the institution's driving force.

"VCU Massey Cancer Center has played and continues to play an important role in the national effort to prevent, detect, control and ultimately cure the many types of cancer," Gordon D. Ginder, M.D., director of VCU Massey Cancer Center, which is among the top 4 percent of cancer centers nationwide to be designated by the National Cancer Institute for its excellence in cancer research. "There are 14.5 million cancer survivors who are alive today because of the [cancer research](#), patient care and education spearheaded by leading cancer centers like Massey, and through continued research discoveries, improved therapies, technological advancement and early detection, there is great potential to increase survival and quality of life for cancer patients. Massey's mission is to do exactly that."

The ACS report estimates nearly 600,000 cancer deaths will occur in the United States in 2016. That means there's still work to be done, Woolf said, adding that there are factors outside of health care that shape health outcomes, including public policy changes on the state and local level. A multidisciplinary effort that includes health screenings for disadvantaged, vulnerable populations must also be part of measures to thwart overall cancer incidence, he said.

The message for the general public is clear. "The nice thing is if you follow a small number of health behaviors, it not only decreases the risk of cancer and [heart disease](#) but other diseases, as well," Woolf said. "If you stop smoking, eat a healthy diet, get regular exercise and take in a moderate amount of alcohol, you can prevent one out of three deaths."

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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