

Debunking myths about cancer

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Four cancer myths are stumbling blocks in the treatment and prevention of the disease. Find out what they are and how to prevent cancer.



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“World Cancer Day’s focus this year on highlighting and debunking the many myths surrounding the disease will be a welcome and empowering change, and strengthen the case for preventative measures in reducing the risk of cancer,” says Allison Vienings, Executive Director of the Self-Medication Manufacturers Association of South Africa (SMASA).

Is there nothing we can do about cancer?

World Cancer Day, commemorated on 4 February, theme is ‘Debunking the Myths’ and focuses on the basic misconceptions surrounding cancer.

One of the myths is particularly close to the heart of the self-medication industry – the fact that there is nothing we can do about cancer.

“Nothing is further from the truth. As an organisation favouring self-help, we are strong proponents of a healthy, cancer-beating lifestyle, and consequently, of disciplined, regular self-checks as a means of early detection. Taking a pro-active role in your own health is a big step towards getting rid of the debilitating myths that so often surround cancer and leave people feeling powerless,” she says.

Four cancer myths

According to worldcancerday.org, the four most common misconceptions people have, and which create huge stumbling blocks in the treatment and prevention of cancer, are...

Myth #1: There is no need to talk about cancer

Myth #2: There are no signs or symptoms of cancer

Myth #3: There is nothing we can do about cancer

Myth #4: We do not have the right to cancer care

Worldwide, a total of 14,1 million new cancer cases and 8,2 million cancer deaths were reported in 2012, with lung and breast cancer the most commonly diagnosed cancers in 2013, according to Globocan 2013.

Globally, cancer kills more people than TB, AIDS and malaria combined. Moving closer to home, approximately 100 000 people are diagnosed with cancer in South Africa every year with a survival rate of 6 out of 10. One in four South Africans are affected by cancer, with prostate cancer the number one form of cancer among South African men and breast cancer the most common among South African women.

Symptoms of cancer

Some of the symptoms associated with cancer can include...

- Lumps
- Coughing
- Breathlessness
- Abnormal breathing
- Unexplained weight loss
- Unexplained pain

Treatment for cancer

“The treatment of cancer varies from case to case. Doctors recommend treatment options depending on the type and stage of cancer, taking the possible side effects into account and the patient’s overall health,” explains Vienings.

The most common cancer treatments include...

- Surgery
- Radiation therapy
- Chemotherapy

These treatments are used either alone or in conjunction with other therapies.

The first treatment a patient receives is called first-line therapy and if this ceases to work, the patient will receive second-line therapy. In certain cases, third-line therapy may also be used.

Prevention of cancer

According to the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), some 1,5 million premature cancer deaths could be prevented every year if targets set to reduce non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are met by 2025.

With up to **90% of cancers caused by environmental and lifestyle related factors**, the conditions in which people live and work and their lifestyles may increase the risk of cancer. “Promoting healthy lifestyles is essential to reducing cancers,” says Vienings.

Incorporating the following changes may reduce and prevent lifestyle and environmentally related cancers...

- **Be sun safe** - Avoid prolonged periods of exposure to the sun
- **Quit smoking** - The use of tobacco is linked to 71% of lung cancer deaths!
- **Rethink that drink** - Reduce the amount of alcohol consumed – [alcohol is linked to an increased risk of cancer](#) and may increase the risk of liver cancer
- **Get active** - Start exercising on a regular basis. Obesity and people who are overweight are strongly linked to an increased risk of bowel, breast, pancreatic and kidney cancers.

SMASA urges every South African to start taking better care of themselves through healthy eating, exercise and basic lifestyle changes and avoid factors that may contribute to an increased risk of cancer.

If you think you might have any or all of the symptoms associated with cancer, visit your local health care professional or doctor immediately and ensure that you schedule regular check-ups with your doctor for early detection.