

Frequently Asked Questions About Cancer

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with cancer, you may be feeling fear, anger, anxiety, sadness, or other emotions. When people have concerns like these, they sometimes turn to the Minnesota Department of Health for answers. Here are some of the most frequently asked questions we receive.



Question: How common is cancer?

Answer: Cancer is a very common disease that affects thousands of people in Minnesota each year. Four in ten Minnesotans will be diagnosed with some form of cancer in their lifetimes. Almost 300,000 (5%) of Minnesotans are currently living with cancer, and as our population ages, the number of people with cancer is expected to increase. The good news is that treatments and cures for cancer are improving all the time.

Question: Are there ways I can reduce my risk of cancer?

Answer: Yes, while not all forms of cancer are preventable, there are actions you can take to help lower your risk for the most common types of cancer.

- Avoiding commercial tobacco, including e-cigarettes and vapes
- Eating a healthy diet
- Not drinking alcohol or doing so only in moderation
- Limiting processed meats
- Being physically active
- Protecting yourself from the sun
- Getting vaccinated against hepatitis B and human papillomavirus (HPV)
- Practicing safer sex and not sharing needles

- Getting regular medical care including screenings for certain types of cancer and guidance on performing regular self-exams

Question: What does MDH do to help protect people from cancer?

Answer: The Minnesota Department of Health actively works to prevent cancer for Minnesotans through research, data collection, and building awareness.

We do this by:

- Gathering data and analyzing it
- Identifying and reducing health disparities
- Providing information and support to those who have been diagnosed with cancer.

We're here to provide you with useful and accurate information in your search for resources and answers.

Data collection and analysis is an important driver of MDH's work to protect Minnesotans from cancer. The Minnesota Cancer Reporting System (MCRS) is the state's information system designed for the collection, storage, and management of data on persons with cancer. Since 1995, MDH has collected information on stage of cancer at the first diagnosis and first course of treatment on all Minnesota residents who have newly-diagnosed cancers.

MCRS data are essential to cancer prevention and control efforts. Local, state, and national experts use cancer statistics to develop, fund, carry out and evaluate public health programs. These statistics are aimed at reducing the risk of developing various cancers through:

- Education and intervention programs (for example, commercial tobacco stop smoking efforts)
- Campaigns to increase vaccinations (hepatitis B and human papillomavirus [HPV])
- Early detection and treatment programs (screening for breast, colorectal, and lung cancers)

MCRS data also support public health efforts to identify and reduce ongoing cancer-related health disparities in Minnesota. Health disparities are preventable differences in the burden of disease, injury, violence, or opportunities to achieve optimal health that are experienced by socially disadvantaged populations, such as the high rates of cancer among people who are Native American or African American/Black.

MDH also provides information and support to those contacting the agency with questions about cancer and potential links to toxic substances in the environment. If you have concerns regarding pollutants in your community, contact the agencies responsible for safeguarding our environment and our health, including:

- The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, www.pca.state.mn.us
- The Minnesota Department of Health, Division of Environmental Health, www.health.state.mn.us/about/org/eh
- Members of tribal communities may contact their Natural Resource Management or Environmental Health departments, www.mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/seniors/health-care/health-care-programs/contact-us/county-tribal-offices.jsp

Question: What environmental hazards can cause cancer?

Answer: The term “environment” includes air, water, and soil, but also substances and conditions in the workplace, schools, home, and other places people live, work, and play.

The most significant risks of developing cancer come from lifestyle factors. However, exposures to certain human-made and naturally occurring chemicals in the environment may contribute to an individual’s risk of developing cancer. Benzene, asbestos, vinyl chloride, radon, arsenic, and trichloroethylene are examples of toxic substances that can increase the risk of cancer when people are exposed to them.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified these substances (and many others) as *known human carcinogens*. Some other chemicals have been shown to cause cancer in animals, but there is not enough evidence to show these chemicals cause cancer in people. These chemicals are classified by IARC as possible or probable (*suspected*) *human carcinogens*. The type and amount of exposure to harmful chemicals influences the risk of developing cancer.

A list of substances known to elevate the risk of cancer as well as information on lowering your risk for cancer can be found on our website, www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.



Question: I think an environmental contaminant is present in my community. Will it cause cancer?

Answer: Knowing whether the presence of an environmental contaminant will cause cancer in an individual is extremely difficult to predict, but the overall risk is most often low. Let's consider why this is so.

Historically, the most significant exposures to cancer-causing chemicals have occurred in workplaces where large amounts of toxic chemicals were used. That is why safe work practices, personal protection, ventilation, and other controls are so important in protecting workers.

The amount of toxic chemicals found in food, air, soil, and drinking water are typically much lower than in the work environment. Therefore, cancer risk from environmental exposures is very low compared to the risk in the workplace. In fact, the cancer risk from environmental exposures is so low that it is difficult to measure in scientific studies.

It is not possible to determine the health of the environment by looking only at the number of people

Fortunately, science is always evolving, and in the future we may develop a better understanding of low-level exposures and how they impact health.

To report concerns about environmental contaminants in your community, please contact MDH Site Assessment and Consultation Unit at 651-201-4897 or by email at health.hazard@state.mn.us.

Question: Who can do a cancer or health study in our area to find out if an environmental exposure leading to cancer has occurred?

Answer: When a person is diagnosed with cancer, it is often difficult and frightening. It is understandable that people want to find a reason for why they have cancer. However, it can be very complicated to determine this.

Many organizations—for example academic, state, federal, non-profit, or health care organizations—may have expertise and the ability to run a health study.

Before pursuing a health study, the goal of the study must be clear and precisely expressed as a question that can be tested. What do you want to know and what will it take to test it, ruling out all other possible explanations? With a clear question, it may be possible to design and carry out a health study. But for some questions, it is not possible to design or carry out a conclusive study.

The Minnesota Department of Health actively works to prevent cancer for Minnesotans through research, data collection, and building awareness.

with cancer, or the number of deaths from cancer, in any given community. This is due to the many other significant factors (other than human-made pollutants, such as lifestyle factors or average age) that contribute to a community's cancer rates.



Health studies are also expensive and take a long time, usually costing millions of dollars and requiring years or decades of study. If MDH conducts a health study, it requires approval of special funding by the Minnesota Legislature or the federal government.

There are many challenges that can make it difficult for a health study to reach meaningful conclusions. These challenges may be technical and complex or simple and practical. A study may not be practical or possible if the necessary information doesn't exist. See "Community Environmental Health Studies," www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.

Question: I was exposed to a contaminant, now what do I do?

Answer: Exposures to contaminants at high levels may result in a serious health problem. If you are experiencing health problems or issues, contact a health care provider right away. Exposures to contaminants at low levels may not result in health issues for many years, if at all. Ongoing regular health check-ups, screenings and physical exams can help detect cancer, as well as other health conditions.

Question: Can I get screened for all types of cancer?

Answer: Cancer screenings can help identify some, but not all, cancers early when they are more easily treated and may help reduce the risk of death from those cancers. Effective screening programs exist for breast, cervical, colorectal, and lung cancers. We are learning more about cancer every day and ways to diagnose and treat cancer are getting better all the time. Talk to a health care provider about screenings recommended for you.

The Minnesota Department of Health's Sage Program (www.health.state.mn.us/cancer/sage/screening/index.html) provides free screening for breast and cervical cancers at participating locations across Minnesota for those who qualify.

Question: Is there a cancer cluster in my neighborhood?

Answer: Cancer is a very common disease that affects thousands of people in Minnesota each year. Four in ten Minnesotans will be diagnosed with a serious form of cancer in their lifetimes. Almost 300,000 (5%) of Minnesotans are currently living with cancer, and as our population ages, the number of people with cancer is expected to increase.

A cancer cluster is a greater than expected number of the same cancer or cancers with similar contributing factors that occur within a group of people in a geographic area over a period of time. It is not unusual to find numerous cases of cancer in one neighborhood, or even more than one cancer in the same household. Often it is just coincidence that cancer—an umbrella term for more than 100 different diseases—occurs in a number of people in one small area, or within one group. It is rare to find a cancer cluster within a community.

It is not possible to determine the health of the environment by looking only at the number of people with cancer, or the number of deaths from cancer, in any given community. The number of people with cancer or the number of deaths from cancer in any given community does not indicate that toxins in an environment are contributing factors. This is because there are so many other significant factors other than human-made pollutants (such as lifestyle factors or average age) that contribute to a community's cancer rates.

Despite the difficulty in connecting exposures to environmental contaminants to any given cancer, MDH can support communities by providing a place for concerns about cancer in a community to be heard and considered.

For more information about cancer clusters, see "Reporting and Investigating Apparent Cancer Clusters," available at www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.



How can I report concerns about cancer in my community?

To share concerns about cancer in your community, please contact the **Minnesota Cancer Reporting System** at 651-201-5900 or email health.mcrs@state.mn.us.

To report concerns about cancer in your community due to exposure to an environmental contaminant, please contact the **Minnesota Department of Health Environmental Health Division** at 651-201-4897 or email health.hazard@state.mn.us.

Did You Know?

85-90% of lung cancer is attributable to smoking, and 95% of cervical cancer is due to the human papillomavirus (HPV).



What can I do if I have concerns about cancer?

Talk to a health care provider. If you have health concerns about cancer it is important to discuss your questions with a health care professional, such as a physician, nurse practitioner, traditional healer, community health worker, or community health representative.

Screening can identify certain cancers early when they are more easily treatable and reduce the risk of death from those cancers. Effective screening programs exist for breast, cervical, colorectal, and lung cancers.

Learn more. Visit our website at www.health.state.mn.us for information about cancer, or www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment for information about cancer and the environment.

Review lifestyle factors. Preventing cancer through healthy daily living is important. For more information, see the “Lowering Your Risk for Cancer” information sheet www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.

Resources

A list of substances known to elevate the risk of cancer can be found on our website, www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.

The American Cancer Society (ACS) (www.cancer.org/about-us/local/minnesota.html) also provides information and resources for Minnesotans with cancer.

To learn more about cancer, cancer resources, and prevention, visit us at our website, www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment.



The Minnesota Department of Health is here for you.

Our vision is for health equity in Minnesota, where all communities are thriving and all people have what they need to be healthy.