

# Lifelines



from the National Cancer Institute

## What are Cancer Disparities and How Do They Affect Me?

*By the National Cancer Institute*

You've been promising yourself that you'd make a change...in fact, you've been promising yourself this for a while. But it just seems that there's never enough time or money to start that exercise program, change your diet, or do something nice for yourself. These simple lifestyle changes may reduce your chances of developing or dying from cancer? You might be asking yourself why?! Why would cancer be influenced by how you live your life, and even where you live, for that matter?

After all, cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for more than 500,000 deaths each year, or one in every four deaths. In addition, one in three Americans will eventually develop some form of the disease. What you may not know, however, is the burden of cancer is too often greater for the poor, ethnic minorities, and the uninsured than for the general population.

And if you live in an African American community, you have even more reason to make these changes for the better! That is because death rates for ALL cancers for both men and women are highest among African Americans. Racial and ethnic groups frequently experience what is known as cancer health disparities. The National Cancer Institute defines "cancer health disparities" as "differences in the incidence, prevalence, mortality, and burden of cancer and related adverse health conditions that exist among specific populations groups in the United States." Meaning, you're more likely to get or die from cancer.

The leading cause of cancer death in African Americans, both men and women, is lung cancer, which is nearly always caused by cigarette smoking. However, when it comes to other cancers, like prostate, colorectal, and breast cancers, the numbers are worse for African Americans than for other races. Death rates from prostate cancer are far higher among African American men than in any other racial or ethnic group (almost 2.4 times higher for African American men than for white men). The frequency of colorectal cancer among African American men and women is higher than for white people. African American women who are diagnosed with breast cancer are less likely than white women to survive five years after diagnosis, and African American women continue to have more deaths from both breast and cervical cancer than white women.

You may be asking yourself, why? Why do such cancer health disparities exist? Researchers agree that the main reasons for these racial cancer health disparities are:

- Lack of access to quality healthcare
- Poverty
- Unhealthy diet
- Less healthy food available in the community
- Living in an unhealthy neighborhood, with exposure to environmental toxins
- Using harmful products such as cigarettes
- Living in stressful environments

However, you can fight these causes of cancer disparities. In fact, the number of new cancer cases can be reduced, and many cancer deaths can be prevented, just by adopting a healthy lifestyle. Quitting smoking or not starting in the first place and avoiding sun exposure have been proven to reduce a person's chance of developing cancer. And increasing physical activity and improving nutrition may help too.

Early detection provides the best opportunity to reduce deaths caused by some cancers; therefore, women at risk must make every effort to receive regular mammograms and Pap smears so breast and cervical cancer can be detected and treated. Men must make every effort to discuss regular screenings with their doctor, including for prostate cancer, to understand the issues and make an informed choice. Both men and women should make an effort to be screened for colorectal cancer. Clearly, seeking your doctor's advice about whether or not you should take screening tests for any type of cancer should be a key in your decision making.

*NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI Web site at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).*