

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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## “Cancer in Relatives Raises New Concerns”

Daily news releases raise new concerns and issues concerning cancer causation and prevention. A 2013 study in *Annals of Oncology* on over 23,000 people, found that for each of 13 cancers, close relatives had an increased risk of the same disease. Also, there was evidence that a family history of one cancer could significantly raise the risk of others. In other words, having cancer in the family can increase your chances of developing not only the same cancer but other types too. Investigators found that for each of 13 cancers, close relatives had an increased risk of the same disease. They said, "Those closely related to someone with oral and pharyngeal cancer had a fourfold increased risk of esophageal cancer, while breast cancer doubled the risk of ovarian cancer for female family members." People with a first-degree relative with cancer of the larynx had triple the normal risk of developing oral and pharyngeal cancer and men had a 3.4-fold increased risk of prostate cancer if a first-degree relative had bladder cancer. Experts also confirmed some known cancer risks. They include a raised risk of women developing breast cancer if they have a family history of bowel cancer. We have been taught that cancer risk depends on genes, lifestyle and environment. Thus, the links between different cancers may be due to shared environmental factors, such as family smoking and drinking habits. Still, there was evidence of genetic factors affecting multiple cancer sites in the body. However, investigators concluded, "Whether or not someone in your family has had cancer, living a healthy life can really help to stack the odds in our favor, and reduce the risk of cancer. The main things you can do are to be a non-smoker, cut down on alcohol, and stay in shape by being active and eating a balanced diet." As a caution, Eluned Hughes, from the charity Breakthrough Breast Cancer, said, "Some breast cancers do run in the family, however it was vital that women remembered most cases were not hereditary." Also, please remember, according to new figures, men are almost three times more likely than women to get esophageal cancer - one of the biggest gender divides in cancer rates. In the United Kingdom, there is a "quiet epidemic" of esophageal cancer (cancer of the food tube) among men. It is one of the most difficult cancers to detect and treat. Food getting stuck when you swallow and persistent heart burn are not normal and you should get it checked out.

In the America that I love, we must be aware of the signs and symptoms of early cancer and act promptly. If you have concerns, please do not hesitate to contact your doctor.

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