

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“Catching Cancer: Is It Possible ?”

You can catch a cold or the flu but can you catch cancer? First, we know that cancer can run in families. 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. Second, 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. In the animal kingdom, things are a bit different. There had been only two examples of transmissible cancer in the wild. These cancers include the dog, "canine transmissible venereal tumor", transmitted by sexual contact, and the "Tasmanian devil facial tumor" disease, transmitted through biting. As of 2015, a new variety of "catching cancer" is being reported in soft-shell clams along the east coast of North America and it is spreading rapidly. Outbreaks of leukemia have devastated some populations of this clam and researchers have called it "beyond surprising." Stephen Goff of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Columbia University, said, "The evidence indicates that the tumor cells themselves are contagious - that the cells can spread from one animal to another in the ocean. We were astonished to realize that the tumors did not arise from the cells of their diseased host animals, but rather from a rogue clonal cell line spreading over huge geographical distances."

In the America that I love, we have been taught that cancer risk depends on genes, lifestyle and environment, but things may be changing. Help avoid cancer by being a non-smoker, cut down on alcohol, and stay in shape by being active and eating a balanced diet. Actually, I wrote a science fiction novel entitled, *Catching Cancer*, which explored this possibilities in humans and it is available at www.amazon.com. It takes you on a nail-biting adventure about cancer contagion. Science fiction may become science fact sooner than expected.

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