

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“Cancer Linked to Infections”

Almost 22% of cancer deaths in the developing world and 6% in industrialized countries are caused by chronic infections and most are known to be due to viruses. For example, hepatitis B or C virus are known to cause cancer of the liver, human papillomavirus (HPV) is linked to cervical cancer and helicobacter pylori bacteria increases the risk of stomach cancer. Even though the infections described here can raise a person’s risk of certain types of cancer, most people with these infections never develop cancer. The risk of developing cancer is also influenced by other factors. For example, infection with *Helicobacter pylori* (*H pylori*) bacteria might increase your risk of stomach cancer, but what you eat, whether or not you smoke, and other factors also affect your risk. The percentage of infection related cancer deaths is even higher in developing countries, but it is lower in the United States and other developed countries. This is partly because certain infections are more common in developing countries, and partly because some other risk factors for cancer, such as obesity, are more common in developed countries. Also, some infections weaken the immune system, making the body less able to fight off other cancer-causing infections. And some viruses, bacteria, and parasites also cause chronic inflammation, which may lead to cancer. Many of the infections that influence cancer risk can be passed from person to person, but cancer itself cannot. While *H pylori* infection is a major cause of stomach cancer, most people who have these bacteria in their stomachs never develop stomach cancer. About 2 in 3 adults worldwide are infected with *H pylori*. The rate of infection is higher in developing countries and in older age groups. It’s likely spread in a couple of ways. One is the fecal-oral route, such as through contaminated food or water sources. It can also be transmitted from one person to another, mouth to mouth. Other factors also play a role in whether or not someone develops stomach cancer. For example, nitrites are substances commonly found in cured meats, some drinking water, and certain vegetables and they can be converted by certain bacteria, such as *H pylori*, into compounds that have been found to cause stomach cancer in lab animals. Better sanitation, antibiotics and vaccinations have helped to cut the numbers of people developing cancers linked to infections. *Chlamydia trachomatis* is a very common kind of bacteria that can infect the female reproductive system. Studies have not shown that chlamydia itself causes cancer, but it might work with HPV in a way that promotes cervical cancer growth.

In the America that I love, we should be aware of cancer causation and prevention. Consult your doctor for more information.

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

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

rhowsmd@hughes.net | www.iwillfindthecure.org

