

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“Cancer Causes 33% of Canadian Deaths”

Canadians continue to smoke, drink, and eat their way towards a diagnosis of cancer, even though public health agencies alert people of ways to prevent up to 40,000 new cases of cancer per year. Cancer is now the leading cause of death in Canada, responsible for 1 in 3 deaths in 2017. Findings from the Canadian Population Attributable Risk of Cancer (ComPARE) study showed that in 2015, more than one third of cancers were caused by "largely preventable" lifestyle, environmental, and infectious agent risk factors. If this trend continues, the annual number of cases of preventable cancer in Canada is projected to almost double by 2046. Cancer expert, Salaheddin M. Mahmud, MD, PhD, said, "While it is true that much progress is needed to find better treatments for cancer, studies such as that conducted by the ComPARE consortium show unequivocally that there is much that can be done to prevent cancer." Studies show that 33% can be attributed to one or more modifiable risk factors. There were no significant differences between men and women. The most common preventable cancers were those of the cervix, lung, and head and neck. Smoking tobacco remains the highest of cancer risk factors, responsible for more than 18% of all cancers diagnosed in 2015. The researchers estimate that more than 11,000 cancers could be prevented each year if people would stop smoking. However, the results also show that the combination of physical inactivity, a sedentary lifestyle, and excess weight accounted for an additional 12% of cancer cases. Other leading modifiable cancer risk factors include alcohol consumption and human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. Similarly, more than 6000 cancers could be avoided by maintaining a healthy weight. Eduardo L. Franco, DrPH, PhD (Hon), editor-in-chief of *Preventive Medicine*, said, "We did not expect obesity to come as strong as it did. As others have said, 'obesity is the new smoking.'" Like Americans, the analysis confirms that Canadians are getting fatter every year. Franco warned, "I think it [obesity] will be a tougher battle than that we brought against smoking, adding: "The issues are far more complex." Experts say that the time has come to act on the key discoveries from cancer prevention research and turn them into measurable benefits for the population. The analysis also demonstrated a small but meaningful burden associated with eating red and processed meat. This lifestyle choice accounted for an estimated 4.5% of associated cancers and 0.7% of all cancers.

In the America that I love, we are learning that cancer prevention is key. Stay active, stay trim, no smoking or heavy drinking and eat healthy. Still, growing older is the biggest risk factor for developing cancer and that is something we cannot avoid.

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