

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“Six Unsuspected Causes of Cancer”

We are aware of many common causes of cancer, such as smoking and excessive alcohol ingestion, but there are other scientifically studied, unsuspected causes of cancer. Here are a few. **Piping hot beverages.** Burning-hot water hitting the esophagus can cause metaplasia, which can progress to cancer. The suggestion that copious cups of hot tea can result in esophageal cancer is an old one. The drinking of copious amounts of excessively hot tea is a history frequently obtained from Russian-born patients. In one study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, drinking hot tea was associated with a five-fold increased risk of esophageal cancer in people who also smoked and drank alcohol. **Oral sex.** The most frequently diagnosed human papilloma virus (HPV)-associated cancer type is no longer cervical cancer but oropharyngeal cancer. And, HPV-related oropharyngeal cancer is strongly linked to oral sex. HPV-related throat cancer can take up to 30 years to appear, so it's most common in adults between the ages of 40 and 60. The greatest risk for contracting oral HPV and developing HPV-related throat cancer is having multiple oral sex partners. **Scented candles.** The evidence is mounting that burning scented candles may result in cancer, particularly bladder cancer. Scented candles burned indoors can release a large number of volatile organic compounds known to be bladder carcinogens. In one investigation, researchers found a total of 34 compounds released from burning scented candles, including a high abundance of potentially carcinogenic formaldehyde as well as aromatic hydrocarbons such as toluene and benzopyrene. **Frequent flying.** In a 2014 study in which researchers compared the health of US flight attendants with the general population, they found that female flight attendants reported 34% more reproductive cancers. Flight attendants were shown to have a higher prevalence of every cancer assessed—especially breast, melanoma, and non-melanoma skin cancers. **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. 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. **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.

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

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