

Chapter 15 Assessing Your Risk Factors for Cancer

The more risk factors you have for a particular cancer, the greater the likelihood that you will develop that cancer. In the lists below for six common cancers—lung, colon, breast, prostate, cervical, and melanoma—check any risk factors and protective factors that apply to you. The more risk factors you check, the more important it is that you adopt healthy lifestyle behaviors and have regular screening tests. The final section lists general protective factors against cancer. There is no score.

LUNG CANCER RISK FACTORS

- ☐ Age greater than 40 (median age at diagnosis: 71)
- ☐ Family history of lung cancer
- ☐ Smoking cigarettes
- ☐ Smoking cigars
- ☐ Exposure to environmental tobacco smoke
- ☐ Exposure to air pollution
- ☐ Exposure to workplace chemicals
- ☐ Fewer than three servings of vegetables per day
- ☐ Fewer than three servings of fruit per day

COLON CANCER RISK FACTORS

- ☐ Age greater than 50 (median age at diagnosis: 71)
- ☐ Family history of colon cancer
- ☐ Overweight
- ☐ More than one serving of red meat per day
- ☐ Fewer than three servings of vegetables per day
- ☐ More than one alcoholic drink per day
- ☐ Less than 30 minutes of physical activity per day
- ☐ Having inflammatory bowel disease for 10 years or more

Lower Risk Associated with:

- ☐ Taking a multivitamin with folate every day
- ☐ Taking birth control pills for at least 5 years
- ☐ Taking postmenopausal hormones for at least 5 years
- ☐ Taking aspirin regularly for more than 15 years
- ☐ Having regular screening tests

BREAST CANCER RISK FACTORS

- ☐ Age greater than 40 (median age at diagnosis: 61)
- ☐ Female sex
- ☐ Family history of breast cancer

- ☐ Jewish ethnicity, especially Ashkenazi descent
- ☐ Overweight
- ☐ Fewer than three servings of vegetables per day
- ☐ More than two alcoholic drinks per day
- ☐ Having had hyperplasia (benign breast disease)

Longer Exposure to Estrogen:

- ☐ Early age at menarche
- ☐ Older age at birth of first child
- ☐ Older age at menopause
- ☐ Fewer than two children
- ☐ Breastfeeding for less than one year combined for all pregnancies
- ☐ Currently taking birth control pills
- ☐ Taking postmenopausal hormones for 5 years or more

PROSTATE CANCER RISK FACTORS

- ☐ Age greater than 55 (median age at diagnosis: 68)
- ☐ Family history of prostate cancer
- ☐ Five or more servings per day of foods containing animal fat
- ☐ Having had a vasectomy
- ☐ African American ethnicity

Lower Risk Associated with:

- ☐ Asian ethnicity
- ☐ At least one serving per day of tomato-based food

CERVICAL CANCER RISK FACTORS

- ☐ Older age (median age at diagnosis: 48)
- ☐ Smoking cigarettes
- ☐ Having had sex at an early age
- ☐ Having had many sexual partners
- ☐ Having had an STI, especially HPV
- ☐ Having given birth to two or more children

Lower Risk Associated with:

- ☐ HPV vaccination
- ☐ Using a condom or diaphragm on every occasion of sexual intercourse
- ☐ Having recommended Pap tests

MELANOMA RISK FACTORS

- ☐ Older age (median age at diagnosis: 59)
- ☐ Family history of melanoma
- ☐ Light-colored hair and eyes
- ☐ Having had severe, repeated sunburns in childhood
- ☐ Exposure to ultraviolet radiation
- ☐ Taking immunosuppressive drugs (for example, after organ transplant)

Lower Risk Associated with:

- ☐ Protecting the skin from the sun
- ☐ Regular self-examination of the skin

GENERAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- ☐ Maintaining a healthy weight
- ☐ Living a physically active lifestyle
- ☐ Consuming a balanced diet with at least five servings of fruit and vegetables a day
- ☐ Limiting alcohol consumption (no more than two drinks a day for men and one for women)
- ☐ Avoiding tobacco
- ☐ Having health insurance

Source: Adapted from “Your Disease Risk,” Harvard Center for Cancer Prevention, www.yourdiseaserisk.harvard.edu.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. For which cancers do you have protective factors?

2. For which cancers do you have risk factors?

3. Are there things you can do that would lower your cancer risk? Consider your individual behavior, environmental factors, and recommended screening guidelines.