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Cancer Tales

BY TED GANSLER, MD

The American Cancer Society surveyed by phone almost 1,000 people who did not have a history of cancer. Ted Gansler, MD, of the ACS, explains the top myths uncovered from the survey and what cancer experts know now.

True or False:

There is currently a cure for cancer, but the medical industry won't tell the public about it because they make too much money treating cancer patients.

Respondents Who Agreed: 27 percent

Reality: One argument against this conspiracy theory is the fact that doctors, laboratory scientists and their loved ones die of cancer at about the same rate as everyone else in the United States. (One exception is that healthcare professionals are less likely to die of tobacco-related cancers because they are more aware of the dangers of tobacco and much less likely to be smokers than the rest of the population.) And why would anyone hide a cure for cancer? Medical breakthroughs of all kinds are quickly announced and applied—as the world has seen with antibiotics and vaccines, such as the polio vaccine.

Finding one all-encompassing cure for cancer is unlikely because cancer is actually many different diseases. For several forms of cancer, such as childhood leukemia, Hodgkin's disease and testicular cancer, cures are already available for the majority of patients.

True or False:

Electronic devices, like cell phones, can cause cancer in the people who use them.

Respondents Who Agreed: 30 percent

Reality: This represents a legitimate area of scientific controversy and should not be dismissed as a so-called myth. A few studies suggested a link with certain rare types of brain tumors, but the consensus among well-designed population studies is that there is no consistent association between cell phone use and brain cancer. Although some studies suggest there may be a small risk of cancer, it's difficult to know whether these results are reliable or are the result of statistical problems or biased recollection by participants. Although it is reassuring that the majority of published studies did not find any danger of cancer, there is not enough information available to say that this concern has been disproved.

True or False:

Treating cancer with surgery causes it to spread throughout the body.

Respondents Who Agreed: 41 percent

Reality: Specialists in cancer surgery know how to safely take biopsy samples and to remove tumors without causing spread of the cancer. In many cases, surgery is an essential part of the cancer treatment plan.

For a few types of cancer, surgeons take extra precautions to prevent any chance of the cancer spreading. For example, in testicular cancer the entire testicle containing the cancer is removed, so no cancer cells are dislodged. Doctors who perform surgery for cancer are highly trained in the intricacies of cancer and anatomy.

True or False:

Regularly eating meat cooked on a charcoal grill won't increase cancer risk.

Respondents Who Agreed: 56 percent

Reality: The worrisome chemicals created by grilling meats are called heterocyclic amines (HAs), which form during grilling, broiling or searing meat in a hot frying pan. While HAs cause cancer in animals, it is uncertain whether the amounts encountered on grilled meat actually increase cancer risk in people. Meat or chicken that is well-done or burnt appears to be the most problematic. Based on the existing research, it seems safe to enjoy grilled meats occasionally.

When you do grill or broil meat, you can minimize your consumption of unhealthy chemicals in a few ways:

Don't eat blackened or burnt parts.

Precook meats in the oven or microwave, and then finish on the grill for just a few minutes.

Substitute grilled vegetables or fruits for part of the meat in your meal.

True or False:

The risk of dying from cancer is increasing in the United States.

Respondents Who Agreed: 68 percent

Reality: The risk of being diagnosed with cancer and the risk of dying of cancer have decreased since the early 1990s. Fewer than half the people diagnosed with cancer today will die of the disease. Some are completely cured, and many more people survive for years with a good quality of life, thanks to treatments that control many types of cancer.

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