

Modifiable cancer risk factors: Looking After Future You

From diet and movement to sleep and screening, here are some simple, practical ways to lower your cancer risk. Small changes can make a real difference.



Modifiable cancer risk factors: simple, evidence-based actions that may help reduce cancer risk

Most of us know someone whose life has been touched by cancer.

While not all cancers can be prevented, research shows there are practical steps we can take to support our health and which may reduce our risk over time. Between 30% and 50% of cancer deaths are linked to factors that we can influence, and you don't need to overhaul your lifestyle overnight.

Looking after your health is often about small, achievable habits that add up over time. Here are some ways you can help lower your risk.

Smoking and tobacco use

If you've been considering quitting smoking or using tobacco products, it's never too late to benefit.

Quitting is one of the most powerful ways to support your long-term health and the benefits show up faster than you think: within 3 months your lung function begins to improve and within a few years, your risk of several cancers drops significantly.

Everyone's journey looks different, and support is available whenever you're ready. You can find practical tools and resources on the [Quit website](#) or by calling the Quitline on 13 7848.



Alcohol consumption

For many people, sharing a drink is part of relaxing after work, celebrating with friends, or winding down after a busy week. But the statistics don't lie, and with alcohol use linked with a higher risk of several cancers including bowel, breast, mouth, throat, voice box, oesophagus and liver, people are exploring ways to keep the social ritual while reducing how much alcohol they drink.

This might mean introducing alcohol-free days, choosing low or no alcohol alternatives, or simply being more mindful about how often, and how much, they drink.

Even small reductions can have benefits for your overall health. Current Australian guidelines recommend no more than 10 standard drinks per week and no more than four drinks on any one day ([The Cancer Council](#)).

Nutrition and diet

When it comes to nutrition, it's easy to think about all the things we're told to avoid. A more helpful approach can be to focus on what you can add.

Research shows that only around 8% of Australians eat enough vegetables (about 5 serves a day), and while you don't have to completely avoid a sausage sizzle or occasional take away, adding some extra veggies, fruits, legumes, or nuts to your meals can support your health and may help reduce the risk of several cancers.

Healthy eating isn't all about restriction and you don't need a 'perfect' diet. Small changes like adding a handful of salad to a sandwich, choosing wholegrain bread, including vegetables with dinner, or keeping fruit handy as a snack, can all contribute to healthier eating patterns over time.

Physical activity

Regular movement supports physical and mental wellbeing and may help lower the risk of several cancers. The encouraging part is that movement doesn't need to be intense or involve a gym membership.

A brisk walk, gardening, playing with the kids, riding a bike, taking the stairs, or stretching between tasks all count.

Current Australian guidelines recommend adults aim for 150-300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity each week, that's less than an hour a day! It's recommended to include muscle strengthening activities at least twice a week and breaking up long periods of sitting wherever possible.

Look for opportunities that fit in with your day, you could try a lunchtime walk with a colleague or using the stairs instead of the lift. Everything counts!



Healthy Habits to support Healthy Weight

Body weight is influenced by many factors, and there's no single approach that works for everyone. Rather than focusing on the number on the scales, it can be more helpful to focus on the habits that support long-term health.

Regular movement, nutritious food, quality sleep and reducing alcohol consumption all contribute to overall wellbeing and can help support a healthy weight over time. If this is an area you'd like support with, a conversation with your GP or an accredited practising dietitian can help you identify realistic, sustainable changes that fit your lifestyle. Small changes maintained over time are often more effective than drastic measures that are hard to stick with.

Sun exposure/ UV protection

Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world and accounts for up to 80% of all cancers diagnosed each year. Sun protection is one of the most effective cancer prevention strategies available to us. So, if you spend your working days out and about, it's important to protect your skin year-round.

Fortunately, there are five easy ways to prevent skin cancer:

1. Slip on clothing that covers your shoulders, arms and legs.
2. Slop on an SPF50 or 50+ broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen.
3. Slap on a hat that protects your face, ears and neck.
4. Seek shade whenever you can.
5. Slide on sunglasses.

Sleep and circadian rhythm

Sleep plays an important role in recovery, concentration, mood, physical health and overall wellbeing.

For emergency service workers, getting quality sleep isn't always straightforward. Rotating shifts, overnight work and busy schedules can all make healthy sleep routines more challenging.

While researchers continue to explore links between sleep patterns and cancer risk, what we do know is that prioritising sleep where possible is one of the best investments you can make in your overall health.

Aim for 7-9 hours in each 24-hour period wherever practical, even if those hours don't happen during traditional sleeping times.



Did you know?

MyPulse provides a range of proactive and preventative health and wellbeing resources designed specifically for emergency service personnel and their families.

Through MyPulse, participants can access health information, educational resources, and wellbeing coaching with qualified health professionals. The aim is not to diagnose illness, but to help participants better understand their health and take positive action where required.

Screening and early detection behaviours

One of the most effective ways to prevent cancer is to take part in the many screening programs that are offered to Australians. Screening can detect cancer earlier, before symptoms appear.

There are four population-based screening programs in Australia.

Breast screening

for women aged 50 – 74 every two years. (women aged in their 40s and over 75 are welcome).

National Bowel Cancer Screening Program

for eligible people aged 50-74 every two years (can opt into the program from 45).

National Cervical Screening Program

for women and people with a cervix aged 25-74 every five years.

National Lung Cancer Screening Program

for eligible people aged 50-70 with a history of smoking, every two years.

Prostate and Testicular Cancer Awareness

There are currently no population-based screening programs for prostate and testicular cancer. However, discussing concerns with your GP is important.

Family history can influence your risk of developing certain cancers. If a close relative has been diagnosed with cancer it is worth discussing with your GP. Knowing your family history may help your doctor recommend earlier screening, additional monitoring, genetic counselling or other preventative measures where appropriate.

Skin Cancer Checks

Skin cancer is highly prevalent in Australia, and in particular Tasmania. Familiarity with your skin

and prompt assessment of new or changing spots can help detect skin cancer at an earlier stage, when treatment is most effective and outcomes are generally better. Regular self-examinations, combined with professional skin checks for those at higher risk, play a key role in reducing the impact of skin cancer.

Firefighters and Presumptive Cancers

Firefighters face unique occupational exposures throughout their careers. Across Australia, presumptive cancer legislation recognises a number of cancers that may be associated with firefighting exposures. For current and former firefighters, maintaining regular health reviews and discussing occupational exposure history with your GP can support timely investigation of any concerns and informed decisions about ongoing health monitoring.

It's also important to note any changes in your body and see your GP if you notice anything that concerns you. Early detection offers the best chance of successful treatment.

References:

<https://www.cancer.org.au/cancer-information/what-is-cancer/facts-and-figures>

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Small changes, real impact

None of this means you have to overhaul your life overnight. Cancer risk is shaped by many small, everyday choices and even modest shifts can add up.

You don't have to get everything right. Pick one habit, work on it, and build from there. And don't forget about the screening programs available to you. They're one of the simplest, most effective tools we have for catching cancer earlier, when it's most treatable.

Remember:



30-50% of cancer deaths are linked to risk factors we can influence.



Early detection saves lives. Don't wait for symptoms book recommended screenings,



Family history isn't destiny, it is important information to share with your GP.



Fire fighters face unique occupational risks. Regular health monitoring can help identify concerns earlier.



The best health habit is one you can stick with. Start small and build momentum.