

## 64% of Americans Believe Some Cancers Are Preventable

### *Moving from awareness to behavior remains a challenge*

More than 64% of Americans believe that lifestyle and behavior influence cancer risk. They're right! It is estimated that 50% to 75% of cancer deaths each year are caused by behaviors such as smoking, physical inactivity, and poor dietary choices.

When asked what people can do to lower their chances of getting cancer, 40.8% of respondents to the Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS 2003) reported that never smoking or quitting smoking reduced cancer risk. Indeed, lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among men and women, and tobacco use is the single most preventable cause of cancer death in the United States.

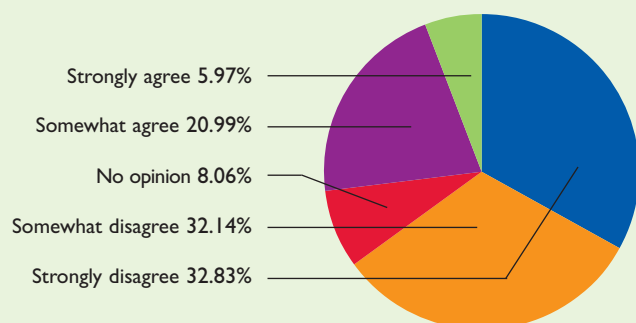
Many Americans recognize that eating well can reduce their risk for cancer: 25% of Americans report that eating a better diet can reduce a person's risk of getting cancer. In fact, diets high in fat and low in fruits and vegetables are linked with several types of cancer.

The charts on this page summarize population estimates of people's perceptions of the role of lifestyle in cancer, and behaviors they believe can reduce cancer risk. Interestingly, while most Americans know the dangers of smoking and its link to lung cancer, 48% inaccurately believe that breast and prostate cancers exact a greater annual death toll than lung cancer. Furthermore, 54% of Americans report that there is nothing they would like to change to reduce their own risk.

Although the American public demonstrates awareness of key cancer prevention activities, 15% of Americans, more than 32 million, believe that nothing can reduce a person's cancer risk. Furthermore, 1% of Americans, over 3 million, are not able to pinpoint a specific action that they could take to reduce their own risk of getting cancer.

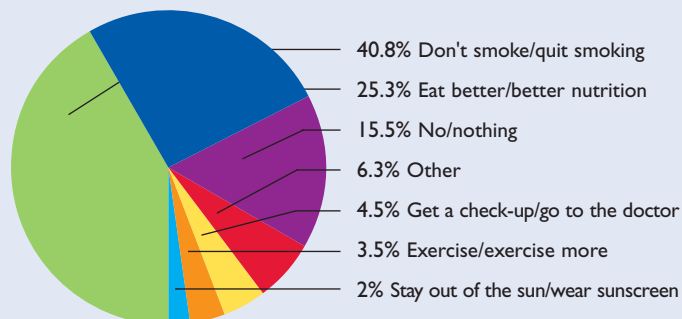
### Do you agree or disagree that there's not much people can do to lower their chances of getting cancer?

Estimated U.S. Population Percentage



### What can people do to reduce their chances of getting cancer?

Estimated U.S. Population Percentage



### What Do Smokers Believe about Their Risk for Lung Cancer?

In a study using HINTS 2003 data, investigators found that current smokers significantly underestimate their risk for developing lung cancer and other tobacco-related illnesses. Smokers think that their own risk for lung cancer is lower than the risk of the average smoker. In addition, the study showed that smokers underestimate the extent to which smoking elevates their lung cancer risk above that of non-smokers: more than half of current smokers regarded their lung cancer risk as no more than twice that of non-smokers; in fact, even for light smokers in the sample, their risk would be about nine times the non-smoker's risk.

Although 13% of the respondents to HINTS 2003 said that quitting smoking was a behavior they'd like to change to reduce their cancer risk, many smokers and former smokers endorse several myths about cancer risk reduction. More than half mistakenly think that exercise can "undo" most of the negative health consequences of smoking, and almost one third believe that vitamins are beneficial in reversing the effects of tobacco use.

### Quick Facts:

- 64% of Americans believe that cancer risks can be reduced.
- 54% of Americans say that there is nothing about their lifestyle they would change to reduce their risk for cancer.
- 10 years after quitting smoking, a person's risk of getting lung cancer is about one third to one half that of people who continue to smoke.
- NCI recommends eating 5 to 9 servings of fruit and vegetables per day to protect against cancers of the colon, mouth, pharynx, esophagus, stomach, and lung.

## Desired Behavior Change: Differences by Age, Race, and Gender

HINTS 2003 reveals that most people believe cancer is preventable, and that many people can identify health behaviors that reduce cancer risk. While the majority of respondents to HINTS admitted that there are no lifestyle changes they would like to make to reduce their own risk for cancer, those who expressed a desire to change are quick to identify relevant behaviors. When asked if there was anything about their behavior or lifestyle that they would like to change to reduce their own cancer risk, respondents most frequently identified smoking cessation or avoidance, improving nutrition, and practicing a healthy lifestyle that includes exercise and weight loss. Here we explore how those responses differ by age, race, and gender.

### Age

- Of those respondents who said that they'd like to change their diets to reduce their own risk for cancer, nutrition was mentioned more frequently by those aged 35-64 (34.1%) compared with those 18-34 (26.2%) and those 65 and older (29.5%).
- A higher percentage of respondents aged 18-34 (43.5%) said they'd like to quit or avoid smoking to reduce their cancer risk compared with respondents aged 35-64 (30.3%) and those 65 and older (20.6%).

- Respondents aged 65 or older (42.0%) more frequently identified practicing a healthy lifestyle that includes exercise and weight loss as a desired behavioral change compared with those 18-34 (16.6%) and 35-64 (26.9%).

### Race/Ethnicity

- A higher percentage of non-Hispanic blacks (41.5%) identified smoking cessation or avoidance as a change they'd like to make to reduce their cancer risk compared with Hispanics (28.6%), non-Hispanic whites (32.3%), and non-Hispanic others (35.2%).
- A higher percentage of non-Hispanic whites (26.0%) compared with Hispanics (23.5%), non-Hispanic blacks (22.6%), and non-Hispanic others (23.1%) said that they'd like to exercise and lose weight to reduce their cancer risk.

### Gender

- A higher percentage of females (33.1%) than males (29.1%) said they'd like to eat a better diet to help prevent cancer.
- A higher percentage of males (40.3%) than females (27.5%) identified smoking cessation or avoidance as a needed change to reduce their cancer risk.
- A healthy lifestyle including exercise and weight loss was identified as a desired change by a higher percentage of females (30.3%) compared with males (19.3%).

## How Can HINTS Inform Your Work?

Americans are getting the message that some cancers are preventable, but public health and communication professionals are challenged to motivate behavior change in the areas of smoking cessation, physical activity, diet, sun safety, and cancer screening. Key implications from HINTS (2003) suggest that

- Smokers underestimate their risk for lung cancer and other tobacco-related illnesses; efforts to emphasize individual risks and the benefits of quitting are needed.
- Most people are aware of the health-promoting behaviors that can reduce cancer risk. Reinforcing messages and providing specific means and support for behavioral change is important.
- Many people are not ready or willing to embark on personal behavior change to reduce their cancer risk. Education, motivation, and support are still important intervention points.
- While people are generally aware of and often desire behavioral change for reducing cancer risk, differences in awareness of key behavioral strategies for reducing risk by age, race, and gender reveal population targets for intervention.

## About HINTS

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) fielded the first Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS 2003) in 2002 and 2003, surveying 6,369 Americans. HINTS was created to monitor changes in the rapidly evolving field of health communication. The survey data can be used to understand how adults 18 years and older use different communication channels to obtain health information for themselves and their loved ones, and to create more effective health communication strategies across populations.

HINTS Briefs provide a snapshot of noteworthy, data-driven research findings. They introduce population-level estimates for specific questions in the survey and summarize significant research findings that are a result of analyzing how age, race, and gender influence specific outcomes.

## For More Information on Cancer

- Call the NCI Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER
- Visit <http://cancer.gov>
- Order NCI publications at <https://cissecure.nci.nih.gov/ncipubs/>

## References Used in This HINTS Brief

- NCI's Cancer Trends Progress Report 2005, <http://progressreport.cancer.gov>
- Weinstein ND, Marcus SE, Moser RP. Smokers' unrealistic optimism about their risk. *Tob Control*. 2005 Feb;14(1):55-9.

