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PERSONAL HEALTH

How Cancer Rose to the Top of the Charts

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An amazing statistic emerged just weeks ago that seems to have gotten somewhat lost in the news about the weather, the Inauguration and the aftermath of the tsunami. Heart disease is no longer the leading killer of Americans under age 85. Cancer is.

In fact, cancer deaths surpassed heart disease in people under 85 as far back as 1999. But until the American Cancer Society compiled its annual statistical report for this year, no one had looked before at deaths among people in this very large age group, which accounts for 98.4 percent of the population.

In 2002, the latest data fully available, 476,009 Americans younger than 85 died of cancer, while 450,637 died of heart disease. Cancer is the leading cause of death among women 40 through 79 and among men 60 through 79.

For the entire American population (that is, including the 1.6 percent who die after their 85th birthdays), heart disease remains the leading cause of death and cancer is the second, accounting for about one death in four.

What the Numbers Mean

The fact is that if the leading cause of death falls sharply, as cardiac deaths have, the second leading cause, cancer, will eventually replace it in the hierarchy of mortality.

But the story behind the newly announced statistics can help dispel many mistaken notions about cancer. It may even prompt some people, especially the young, to make life-enhancing changes that may enable them to live cancer-free beyond the age of 85.

Many people have remarked to me in recent years that "everyone" seems to have cancer, and they envision an expanding epidemic of the disease that people in this country fear most. But the facts are different: cancer death rates, too, have been falling, though not for as long or as fast as those for heart disease.

Heart disease long claimed far more lives than cancer, both for the overall population and especially among people over 40. In fact, heart disease is still the leading killer for some segments of the population, including men 40 through 59 and both men and women 75 through 84.

But over all, cardiac deaths have been on a rather sharp decline since 1975, whereas a fall in deaths from several leading types of cancer - like breast cancer in women and lung and prostate cancer in men - has been more gradual and did not become notable until 1990 or later.

The reasons for this disparity in mortality rates are not hard to find, and they attest to fundamental differences between the two diseases.

By far the main reason for the steep decline in cardiac deaths has been the reduction in cigarette smoking, especially among middle-aged men. Smoking is a leading cause of sudden cardiac death, and quitting smoking nearly eliminates this risk within a smoke-free year or two.

The relationship between smoking and cancer is quite different. Smoking can damage the genetic material in cells in many organs of the body. The damage is cumulative and irreversible, and evidence of it can take decades to emerge as a cancer - of the lung, larynx, mouth, bladder, pancreas, even the breast, among other organs. A person may quit smoking, but a nascent cancer will not disappear.

Another leading reason for the reduction of heart deaths is the recognition and treatment of two major cardiac risk factors, high blood pressure and elevated blood cholesterol levels. Every day, tens of millions of American men and women take drugs that lower blood pressure or cholesterol, drugs that have been shown in controlled clinical trials to reduce the chances of premature cardiac death significantly.

Warnings about dietary risks have also yielded results, with millions of Americans drastically reducing their consumption of artery-damaging saturated fats and cholesterol and consuming more protective polyunsaturated and monounsaturated oils in their place.

Finally, advances in treatments like bypass surgery and angioplasty for people with known heart disease or clogged coronary arteries have reduced or delayed cardiac deaths in many.

Preventing Cancer Deaths

There are very few comparable measures that can protect against cancer. For someone with chronic heartburn, taking a daily antacid and avoiding irritating foods and beverages can protect against damage to the esophagus that can eventually lead to deadly esophageal cancer.

But it takes about 10 years of not smoking for the body to counter the damage done to lungs by cigarette smoking. Whether the risk of other smoking-related cancers also declines with time is not well-established. And the damage caused by exposure to some cancer-causing substances like asbestos can never be undone.

Cancer-protective dietary measures, like eating lots of fruits and vegetables and less meat, as well as getting regular exercise, may require a lifetime of effort to be very helpful, though adopting such measures at any time is hardly a bad idea.

One change in Americans - the steady rise in body weights - adds to the risk of both cancer and heart disease. No government or medical action required here: just personal responsibility.

Nonetheless, we know why deaths from certain cancers are on the decline, and expanding the use of protective measures can certainly save more lives. Early detection of cancer and precancerous growths can reduce the risk of cancer deaths, through routine mammograms to screen for breast cancer, Pap smears to pick up precancerous cells or early cancer of the cervix, colonoscopy to detect precancerous or cancerous polyps in the large intestine and probably P.S.A. blood tests to find early prostate cancer.

Where We Are Now

Cancer is not going to go away anytime soon, though many leads, especially those involving molecular factors in cancer, are being hotly pursued both for early detection and more precise therapies.

This year in the United States, the cancer society estimates that 1,372,910 new cases of cancer will be diagnosed and 570,260 people will die from the disease. Thanks to early detection and improved treatments, however, five-year survival rates have been rising steadily, to 74 percent today from 50 percent in the 1970's.

Lung cancer, a largely preventable disease, remains the leading cancer killer in men and women, accounting for one in three cancer deaths in men and one in four in women. After several decades of rising lung cancer deaths among women, the rate has leveled off after millions of women got smart and quit smoking or chose not to start.

Deaths from the other leading cancers - breast cancer in women, prostate cancer in men and colon cancer in both men and women - can be reduced through early detection and other measures already known. Now it is up to every one of us to take advantage of them.