

# What Is Cancer?

Cancer is a chronic, possibly fatal illness, which develops when toxic substances cause the body to develop genetic mutations that grow due to a process known as inflammation\*. Generally speaking, our body's immune system prevents cancer from developing by repairing the DNA (essential component of living cells) or by killing damaged cells. Illness occurs when the balance between "sleeping" cancerous cells in the body and the body's natural defences is disturbed and when the person's "terrain"\*\*\* is conducive to this process.

Cancers usually develop very slowly, during five, fifteen, even thirty years or more, which gives us a chance to detect the illness and intervene in order to slow or block its development.

Why are cancers on the increase? **An aging population**, improved **screening** techniques, and the Western **sedentary** lifestyle that has been linked to **obesity** and **fast foods** are some factors to consider. However, they alone are not responsible for the increase in cancer.



\*Inflammation is one of the body's normal defence mechanisms, but in the case of cancer, it is unable to repair the cells. Inflammation progresses and eventually neutralizes the white blood cells our immune system needs to fight cancer cells.

\*\***Terrain:** Every individual has their own "terrain", or history, in other words a unique combination of heredity, experience and lifestyle that predisposes them to good health or illness.

## An Illness of Our Industrial Civilization

While being confronted with it is an extremely personal experience, cancer is a social and collective illness the causes of which are not solely individual, but rather diverse and complex. Cancer is a disease that is rooted in our industrial civilization. Since the Second World War, our world and way of life has been transformed by multiple interventions and progress, but there is a flip side to these changes: they pose a threat to biodiversity and human health. Pesticides, plastic and other toxic materials, refined products full of sugars, fats, additives, dyes, conservation agents and nitrites—the list of carcinogenic substances with which we are in contact is long! Added to this is the stress of a high-pressure lifestyle. When stress is chronic, it can be very toxic.

**The causes for the increase in cancers since the 1960s are mainly environmental, but this fact has been overlooked for economic and financial reasons. Medical and governmental authorities focus all their attention on so-called "risk" behaviours. The finger is pointed at individuals and the real culprits are never blamed.**

BARBIER, G. et A. FARRACHI (2007), *La société cancérigène : Lutte-t-on vraiment contre le cancer?*, Paris, Éditions Points, 220 p.

Cancer is frightening, but there is some good news: we now have a better understanding of its weak points. Cancer can stop growing or not appear at all if the immune system is strong. Furthermore, we know that a diagnosis does not automatically signify death; many cancers are now being treated more effectively than in the past. Nevertheless, no prognosis is precise. Healing depends on numerous factors, including the person's living conditions and environment, attitude and social network.

## Get Active

### By taking control of your health:

- » **Properly inform yourself about cancer.**
- » **Breast self-exam (in the case of abnormality, see a physician immediately).**
- » **Clinical breast and pelvic exam (once a year).**
- » **Programme québécois de dépistage du cancer du sein (the Québec Breast Cancer Screening Program or PQDCS).**  
A lot of contradictory information is circulating. Inform yourself properly so you can make an informed decision.

### By activating your body's own defence mechanisms. How?

- » **Calm your mind** by setting time aside for yourself and those close to you and getting enough sleep: sleep is essential to a properly functioning immune system.

Complementary medicines such as Chinese medicine and various relaxation techniques are very useful tools for emotional and physical relaxation.

- » **Limit your exposure to tobacco.**
- » **Make sure you eat a variety of foods, eat moderately, chew your food thoroughly and drink water.**

Certain foods are particularly useful for fighting cancer: turmeric, garlic, lemon, green tea, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and other green and orange vegetables, bean sprouts, mushrooms, berries, plums, peaches, nectarines, apples, fish, beans, olive oil, seaweed (wakame, nori). To maximize their beneficial effects, reduce your consumption of alcohol, animal fats, sweets, sliced meats, chips, fries, carbonated drinks; also white bread, flour, rice and sugar.

- » **Get your body moving, in the sun, if possible.** All physical activity is beneficial!
- » **Reduce environmental pollutants.**

For more information or suggestions: [www.rqasf.qc.ca](http://www.rqasf.qc.ca)



### By adopting an integrated\* approach

There are various methods for treating cancer: surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and immunotherapy. It is recommended that these treatments be combined with alternative treatments to reduce side effects and reinforce the body's natural defence system, thereby lowering the risk of relapse.

If you have been diagnosed with cancer, keep in mind that no alternative approach or medicine has been known to cure cancer by itself.

- **Ask for a second opinion** to confirm the diagnosis and choose the best treatment option for you.
- Ensure that you are **physically and mentally active**. It has been proven that people who are physically active have fewer relapses than those who are not and they are more able to maintain a positive outlook.
- **Traditional Chinese medicine (acupuncture, Qi Gong)** helps to prevent and cure cancer. During chemotherapy treatments it can help to reduce nausea and vomiting and other types of discomfort.
- **Eat healthy foods and choose the proper dietary supplements;** **homeopathic** treatments and **aromatherapy** can also be helpful (check the complete file on [www.rqasf.qc.ca](http://www.rqasf.qc.ca)).
- **Laugh often and laugh a lot.** Laughter is the most powerful and most accessible stimulant for the immune system!

**Watch out for quacks! Avoid therapists who:** refuse to work in partnership with cancer specialists or who advise you to stop conventional treatments; propose an untested or risky therapy, or a treatment that is excessively costly given the lack of proof of its effectiveness; or guarantee results, but only on the condition that you really want to be cured (Servan-Schreiber).

\* **Integrated** (approach, form of medicine): combination of complementary or traditional approaches and modern medicine.

**Breast cancer...** One in nine Canadian women will be afflicted at some time in her life; one in 27 will die as a result. **Symptoms:** change in the shape, contour or thickness of the breast, variation or persistent pain in one breast, appearance of hard lumps in the breast or armpit, significant discharge from one nipple, nipple hardening or inversion, patch of irregular or puckered skin, appearance of new beauty marks or new veins, skin dimpling or puckering, reddening, warmth, inflammation.

**Endometrial cancer (uterus)...** Mainly diagnosed in women aged 50 or older, after menopause; affects one in 39 women. **Symptoms before menopause:** bloody vaginal discharge between periods or heavy and prolonged periods; **after menopause:** bloody or other vaginal discharge, cramps in the lower abdomen, pain during urination, pain during sex.

**Ovarian cancer...** Occurs mainly in women between 60 and 75; one in 70 Canadian women will be affected by this disease in her lifetime. **Symptoms:** stomach swelling or bloating, nausea, indigestion, change in stools, frequent urination, menstrual irregularities, fatigue, back pain, lower abdominal discomfort or heaviness, weight loss or gain.

**Cervical cancer...** Only one in 148 Canadian women will be affected during her lifetime. **Symptoms:** abnormal vaginal bleeding, pelvic or lower back pain, pain during sex.

**Please note:** These symptoms can be caused by different health problems or simply associated with the menstrual cycle (e.g., breast changes during the cycle). They do not necessarily signal the presence of a cancer.



Serge Mongeau, a physician who promotes a holistic approach to health, sees illness as "the sign of an imbalance in one of the pillars" of health. These pillars are: nutritious diet, adequate physical exercise in terms of amount and quality, anti-stress methods, healthy environment, a minimum level of happiness.



"Cancer lies dormant in all of us. Like all living organisms, our bodies are making defective cells all the time. That's how tumors are born. But our bodies are also equipped with a number of mechanisms that detect and keep such cells in check. In the West, one person in four will die of cancer, but three in four will not." In these people, the defence mechanisms succeed in neutralizing the cancer. *David Servan-Schreiber*

## Find out more

Read *Les cancers du sein et des organes reproducteurs (endomètre\*, ovaires et col de l'utérus)* section of our kit *Notre soupe aux cailloux : Une œuvre collective pour la santé des femmes au milieu de la vie* (in French only), available on RQASF's website: [www.rqasf.qc.ca](http://www.rqasf.qc.ca).

Produced by the Réseau québécois d'action pour la santé des femmes (RQASF), this kit presents a wide selection of information and tools to help women make informed choices about their health as they enter menopause.

Additional references:

\*JENSEN, K. and L. R. Vanderhaeghe. *No More HRT: Menopause – Treat The Cause*, Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2003.

\*SERVAN-SCHREIBER, D. *Anticancer. A New Way of Life*, Toronto: Harper Collins, 2008.



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[www.rqasf.qc.ca](http://www.rqasf.qc.ca)

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## Cancers of the Breast and Reproductive Organs\*

Women's Health  
in Midlife

The word cancer alone sparks fear. It revives the sense of powerlessness we feel in the face of this unpredictable and complex disease. Also, the discourse about cancer often generates anxiety and guilt by focussing on everything people should have done individually to prevent it.

This pamphlet gives a summary of the positive steps you can take that will help prevent cancer or help you get well after cancer has been diagnosed. It highlights the societal dimension of this disease and the importance of integrating the benefits of a variety of health approaches. Women have the power to make informed decisions about their health and the freedom to choose the treatments that best suit their needs.

\*Endometrium (lining of the uterus), ovaries and cervix.

