

What doctors want patients to know about cancer screening and prevention

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Cancer is a word that can stop us in our tracks, stirring up a whirlwind of emotions. But in the fight against cancer, knowledge is more than power—it is a lifeline. Every year, [cancer kills over 600,000](#) in the U.S., and about 2 million are diagnosed with cancer, but the growing arsenal of tools for prevention and early detection offers hope and a path forward.

The challenge lies in understanding when, how and why to take action. Screening guidelines evolve, risk factors shift and advances in science continue to rewrite what we know about staying one step ahead.

Here is a list from the AMA's What Doctors Want Patients to Know™ series—which gives physicians a platform to share what they want patients to understand about today's health care headlines—on some important tips for patients about cancer prevention and screening.

1

Start screening for breast cancer at 40

It's natural for women to worry about breast cancer, especially since many people know someone who was touched by the disease. While there is no foolproof way to prevent breast cancer, there are things you can do to lower your risk. Some factors you can't change but knowing what can help is key to lowering your risk of breast cancer. An internist discusses what patients need to know to reduce their risk of breast cancer.

2 Cervical cancer is preventable

Cervical cancer is a slow-growing disease that rarely causes symptoms in its early stages, but it also is, fortunately, one of the few cancers that's almost completely preventable. That's because it comes down to being able to avoid the human papillomavirus (HPV), which can be detected in more than 90% of all cervical cancers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Yet the virus alone is not sufficient to cause cervical cancer—there are other contributing factors to keep in mind too. Five ob-gyns discuss what patients need to know about preventing cervical cancer.

3 Family history can increase risk of colon cancer

Colorectal cancer—which refers to cancer of the colon or the rectum—is the second leading cause of cancer death in the U.S. And it doesn't seem to have any signs of slowing—the rates of colorectal cancer are rising in adults 20 through 49 years old. Yet about 30% of patients who are eligible in the United States still have not been screened for colorectal cancer. Two physicians share more about colorectal cancer.

4 Smoking is the leading risk factor of lung cancer

Lung cancer causes about 160,000 U.S. deaths a year, which is greater than the toll of the next three most common cancers—colon, breast and prostate—combined. Yet only about 30% of lung cancer cases are diagnosed early. Most patients are diagnosed at a far less treatable, later stage of the disease. And with about 20% of lung cancer deaths preventable, evidence-based screening recommendations for high-risk patients offer the best hope to catch the disease early and provide the best chance for effective treatment. A medical oncologist shares more.

5 There is no known way to prevent ovarian cancer

Ovarian cancer affects one or both ovaries. While it is not common, it is the top cause of deaths from any gynecologic cancer in the U.S., according to the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. This may be because ovarian cancer often goes undetected until it is in an advanced stage. Occurring most commonly in women between the ages of 50 and 65, what is known about risk factors has not translated into practical ways to prevent ovarian cancer. Two ob-gyns discuss what patients need to know about reducing the risk of ovarian cancer.

6 When found early, prostate cancer can be curable

Despite the recent increase in awareness of prostate cancer, it is the tendency of many men to remain silent about their prostate issues. But overlooking this widespread health concern won't lead to its resolution. An oncologist shares more.

7 There is risk of skin cancer in every season

Skin cancer can take many forms, but the most common are basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma. The common culprit behind these skin cancers is often too much exposure to ultraviolet rays either from the sun or from artificial sources like tanning beds. But they can occur for other reasons too. That is why it is important to understand your risk and know what steps to take to prevent skin cancer.

Two AMA member physicians—including a dermatologist at [Mid-Atlantic Permanente Medical Group](#)—outlined what patients need to know about skin cancer risk and prevention. Mid-Atlantic Permanente Medical Group is a member of the [AMA Health System Program](#) provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

When it comes to effective doctor-patient communication, it's important that both parties are speaking from a base of shared knowledge. The AMA's What Doctors Want Patients to Know series explores dozens of health topics, including [getting flu vaccines](#), [preventing falls](#) and [using AI for health tips](#).