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World Cancer Day 2016 – We Can I Can

World Cancer Day is marked on 4 February and the theme for this year is “We Can I Can”.

“This theme recognises that the continued battle against cancer is not a singular effort and a unified response is needed to ensure a path to victory,” says Prof Vikash Sewram, director of the African Cancer Institute at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University. “Everyone can play a role in ensuring global success.”

“In South Africa the latest statistics reveal that in 2010, just over 27,000 males and close to 30,000 females were diagnosed with cancer,” says Sewram. The most common cancers in males are prostate, lung and colorectal whilst in females, breast, cervical and colorectal were the top three cancers.

“The cancer rates continue to rise and concerted effort is required from country leaders, government officials, cancer advocates, communities and individuals to raise awareness, ensure equitable and adequate mobilisation of resources, and provision of successful treatments and management of this disease,” explains Sewram.

Currently, 8.2 million people die from cancer worldwide every year, of which nearly half die prematurely (between the ages of 30 and 69). About 70% of deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries.

“Unless we commit to collective efforts in addressing this disease, the statistics will just become worse,” says Sewram. “World Cancer Day is the one singular initiative under which the entire world can unite together in the fight against the global cancer epidemic, raising the profile of cancer worldwide with the aim of reducing millions of preventable deaths each year.”

The African Cancer Institute is a key player in the global fight against cancer through its commitment to research excellence, committed and inspired faculty and robust partnerships with world-renowned research and training institutions as well as advocacy and support groups. “These partnerships have ensured that the best minds work cohesively in bringing hope to cancer patients and their families worldwide,” says Sewram.

“It is important to note that about 30% of cancer deaths are due to the five leading behavioural and dietary risks: high body mass index; low fruit and vegetable intake; lack of

physical activity; tobacco use; and alcohol use. Many cancers can be prevented by avoiding exposure to these common risk factors,” Sewram advises.

What can I do?

I can:

1. Make healthy choices
2. Learn about early detection and be vigilant with respect to screening
3. Ask for support and support others
4. Be myself and take control of my journey
5. Share my story and speak out

What can We do?

We can:

1. Prevent cancer
2. Inspire action and take action
3. Challenge perceptions and create healthy environments
4. Improve access to care
5. Build a quality cancer workforce and mobilise networks to drive progress
6. Make a case for investing in cancer control and shaping policy
7. Work together for increased impact

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Diet can cause or prevent cancer

Last year the World Health Organisation (WHO) made the announcement that red and processed meats increase a person’s risk of colorectal cancer.

This was particularly bad news for South Africa, a country with a big appetite for red meat and processed meat products like sausage, biltong and polony.

“Based on the evidence from 800 studies, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (the WHO’s cancer arm) classified processed meat as ‘carcinogenic to humans’, while red meat was categorised as ‘probably carcinogenic to humans’,” says Prof Vikash Sewram, director of the African Cancer Institute at Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS).

The World Cancer Research Fund recommends that you eat no more than 500g of red meat a week and little or no processed meat. Red meat includes beef, mutton/lamb and pork, and processed meat refers to meat preserved by smoking, curing or salting, and the addition of chemical preservatives.

“Evidence suggests that eating 500g or less of red meat a week does not significantly increase a person’s risk for bowel cancer. Red meat is also a good source of valuable nutrients such as protein, iron, zinc and vitamin B12, so it can contribute to a healthy, balanced diet,” says Irene Labuschagne, a dietician with the Nutrition Information Centre of Stellenbosch University (NICUS) at the FMHS.

“Processed meat on the other hand has less valuable nutrients and can be high in fat and salt, so if you eat red meat it is best to choose fresh, unprocessed meat.”

There is a complex relationship between diet and cancer. While certain dietary factors contribute to the development of cancer, others protect against it. An analysis of global research by the World Cancer Research Fund found that about a third of the most common cancers can be prevented by following a good diet, maintaining a healthy weight and regular physical activity.

“There is convincing evidence that overweight and obesity increase the risk of a number of cancers,” says Labuschagne.

Research also links excess body fat to breast cancer in postmenopausal women. Other dietary factors that increase the risk for breast cancer are saturated fat (butter, cream and other products made from animal fat) and alcohol use. “Women who have one alcoholic drink per day have a small (11%) increased risk for breast cancer while two alcoholic drinks a day raise the risk to 25%,” says Labuschagne.

Alcohol consumption is also linked to an increased risk for several cancers of the gastrointestinal tract. There is convincing evidence that alcoholic drinks can cause cancers of the mouth, throat (pharynx and larynx), oesophagus, colon and rectum.

“There is a dose-response relationship between alcohol and cancer, and the more you drink, the greater the risk. The risk is multiplied when drinkers of alcohol also smoke tobacco,” says Labuschagne. “Bright coloured non-starchy vegetables and fruit (such as carrots, peppers, broccoli and strawberries) seem to offer protection from these cancers.”

There are also strong links between diet and lifestyle, and cancers affecting the colon and rectum (colorectal). “Overweight and low levels of physical activity are linked to a higher risk of colorectal cancer, that also increases with age, while foods high in fibre, and also garlic, milk and calcium seem to offer protection against this cancer,” says Labuschagne.

“Research is confirming that the small choices we make each day have an important impact on our cancer risk. What we eat, how we prepare food, whether we drink alcohol or manage our weight – these simple decisions make an important difference,” says Labuschagne.

Dietary recommendations to prevent cancer

- Attain and maintain a healthy body weight – be as lean as possible.
- Avoid sugar-containing beverages and processed meat.
- Limit your intake of energy-dense food, such as chips, sweets and other products with a high oil and/or sugar content.
- Limit your intake of alcohol.
- Limit salty food and red meat.
- Eat mostly food of plant origin – eat a variety of non-starchy vegetables and fruit every day, and include unprocessed cereals and/or pulses in every meal.

Ends

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