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## Cancer Health Center

### Many Americans Believe Cancer Myths

#### Misconceptions About Personal Risk of Cancer Common, Survey Shows

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WebMD Medical News

July 26, 2007 -- True or not: Underwire bras cause breast cancer, and the risk of dying from cancer in the U.S. is increasing.

If you answered “no” to the first statement, and “yes” to the second, you probably know as much as the average American about cancer risk, according to a newly published survey by the American Cancer Society (ACS).

The 12-question survey revealed that a surprising number of Americans believe scientifically unproven claims concerning cancer.

The questions included those about cancer risk associated with smoking, commercial tanning, and behaviors, such as the use of electronic devices and personal hygiene products.

The notion that underwire bras cause cancer is pure urban myth that has been making the rounds on the Internet for the past several years, Kevin Stein, PhD, of the ACS, tells WebMD.

#### Death Risk Dropping

Nearly seven in 10 people surveyed (68%) incorrectly believed the risk of dying from cancer was increasing in the U.S.

While the overall number of cancer deaths has been rising, this is because the population is increasing, as is the average age of Americans.

But statistics make it clear that an individual's risk of dying from cancer has been going down over the last two decades, while the five-year survival rate among people with the disease has been going up, says Stein.

“It is not hard to understand why people would believe their risk of dying from cancer is greater, but the implications for prevention and treatment are troubling,” Stein tells WebMD. “If people believe we aren’t successfully treating cancer or if they believe a certain behavior is not a risk factor, they might be more likely to engage in that behavior or put off seeking treatment.”

Stein points out that despite the growing and aging population, the actual number of cancer deaths in the U.S. fell last year for the first time in the history of cancer surveillance.

#### What You Don't Know ...

The 957 adults who responded to the survey did reasonably well on many of the questions, with two-thirds correctly identifying at least seven of the 12 statements as false.

The study appears in the Sept. 1 issue of the ACS journal *Cancer*.

Among the other highlights from the survey:

- ❖ Nearly 4 out of 10 people (39%) incorrectly believed that living in a polluted city was a greater risk for lung cancer than smoking a pack of cigarettes a day, while 19% were not sure if the statement was true or false.
- ❖ 15% incorrectly believed that people who smoke low-tar cigarettes were less likely to die of lung cancer than people who smoked regular cigarettes, and 11% weren't sure if this was true.
- ❖ Roughly 1 in 5 respondents did not believe or weren't sure if long-time smokers could reduce their lung cancer risk by quitting smoking.

- ❖ Fewer than 1 in 10 believed that breast cancer screening through mammogram or X-ray caused breast cancer (8.4%), that getting a base tan at a tanning salon helped protect against later damage from the sun (6.2%), or that underwire bras contribute to breast cancer (6.2%).

### Misinformed or Misled?

Men were more likely to believe the false or unlikely statements than women, and people with less education were even more likely to endorse the incorrect statements. The finding should help cancer prevention groups better target education efforts in the future, Stein says.

Oncologist Larry Norton, MD, of New York's Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, says the survey responses also point to a need to better understand where people get their cancer information.

Norton is deputy physician-in-chief for breast cancer programs at the cancer center.

He points out that even with the current restrictions on tobacco advertising, tobacco companies in the U.S. are still spend more each year promoting their products than is spent on all of cancer research.

"It is clear that the American public is misinformed, but are they uninformed or are they being fed misinformation?" he says.

He illustrates the point with the case of a tanning salon near his New York office with a sign in the front window advertising their "safe UV light" tanning beds.

"There is no such thing," he says.

SOURCES: Stein, K. *Cancer*, Sept. 1, 2007; vol 110: online edition. Kevin Stein, PhD, director, quality of life research, Behavioral Research Center, American Cancer Society. Larry Norton, MD, deputy physician-in-chief, breast cancer programs, Memorial Hospital, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York City.

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My Notes:

