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February Marks National Cancer Prevention Month

While genetics and environmental exposures play a role in cancer development, research shows that a significant portion of cases can be prevented through everyday habits and timely medical care. Prevention Begins with Daily Choices Cancer prevention focuses on lowering the chance of developing the disease by reducing exposure to known risk factors.

Leading health organizations emphasize three core strategies:

- Routine screenings that detect cancer early, when treatment is most effective
- Protective vaccines, including HPV and hepatitis B
- Healthy lifestyle habits that meaningfully reduce risk

Modifiable Risk Factors. Many cancer risks stem from behaviors that individuals can change. Key modifiable factors include:

- Tobacco use and secondhand smoke: Avoiding tobacco in all forms remains one of the most effective ways to reduce cancer risk. Smoking and chewing tobacco increase the likelihood of cancers affecting the lungs, mouth, throat, pancreas, bladder, and more. Even secondhand smoke poses a significant danger.

- Diet and weight management: Diets low in fruits, vegetables, and fiber—and high in red or processed meats—are linked to increased cancer risk. Cooking foods at very high temperatures, such as grilling, broiling, roasting, or frying, can create advanced glycation end products (AGEs), compounds associated with a higher risk of stomach, colorectal, pancreatic, and breast cancers when consumed frequently.

- Physical inactivity and excess body weight: Regular movement and maintaining a healthy weight support overall health and help lower cancer risk.

- Alcohol use: Limiting alcohol intake can reduce the risk of several cancers, including breast, liver, and colorectal cancers.

- Protecting Against UV Radiation: UV radiation from the sun and tanning beds is a major cause of skin cancer, including basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma. Prevention strategies include: Seeking shade during peak sun hours (10 AM–4 PM), wearing protective clothing, applying and reapplying broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher, and avoiding indoor tanning devices.

- Early Detection Saves Lives. Routine screenings can identify several cancers early, improving treatment outcomes. Vaccines such as HPV and hepatitis B protect against viruses known to cause cancer. Individuals are encouraged to stay alert to warning signs such as unusual bleeding, a persistent cough, changes in bowel habits, or changes in moles, and to seek medical attention promptly.

National Cancer Prevention Month serves as a reminder that prevention is powerful. Through informed choices, regular medical care, and community awareness, individuals can take meaningful steps to reduce their cancer risk and support long-term health.

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