

CANCER

Cancer is the spread of an excessive amount of mutated cells throughout the body. There are currently more than 100 known types of the disease. In some cases, cancer can lead to the formation of tumors (malignant: cancerous or benign: non-cancerous); however, not all of them do.¹ Surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation are three forms of treatment for the disease. If detected and treated early, the cancer survival rate increases. If not, it can continue to invade parts of the body and result in death.

Cancer occurs in all cultures, regardless of class, ethnicity, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation. Environmental factors such as chemicals, radiation, tobacco smoke, and viruses in addition to certain lifestyle choices like alcohol and tobacco use, unprotected sun exposure, poor dieting, and physical inactivity may increase risks for cancer.² In the Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander community, other factors such as acculturation, poverty, low access to education, low cancer screening rates, late diagnosis, and the lack of culturally sensitive educational and prevention programs increase cancer morbidity and mortality rates.

CHINESE AMERICANS

The Population

According to the 2006 American Community Survey, there are currently 2,998,518 Chinese people (excluding Taiwanese) living in the United States. Chinese Americans are the largest Asian ethnic group, comprising 22.9% of the total Asian American population. The community itself is extremely mixed and composed of varying linguistic capabilities, occupations, and socioeconomic statuses. Nearly half (45.2%) of the population entered the U.S. before 1990, while 31.4% entered from 1990-1999, and 23.4% from 2000 and later. High concentrations of Chinese have settled in the large metropolitan cities in California, New York, and Texas. About 30.5% of Chinese are natives to the U.S., 28.8% are non-U.S. citizens, 40.7% are naturalized U.S. citizens and 69.5% are foreign born.³ Such a range of immigration patterns and diverse citizenship statuses makes it difficult for the healthcare system to address the health concerns of the entire Chinese American population.

Language Proficiency

Miscommunication between patients and healthcare professionals negatively affect care quality and creates health disparities. In a study conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, 46.5% of Chinese people thought they spoke English less than “very well.” And only 16.7% of Chinese people said they spoke only English at home compared to the 23.3% of Asian Americans that do. This is an issue because another piece of research discovered that those who spoke English well were more likely to be screened for cancer, than those with limited English.⁴

Education

The U.S. Census Bureau also observed that 18.8% of Chinese Americans received an education that was lesser than that of a high school education, whereas the percentage for other Asian ethnicities (Asian Indians, Filipinos, Japanese, and Koreans) remained considerably higher.³ This statistic reflects low access to education, which in turn, continues to facilitate miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Poverty

Poverty rates deny Chinese Americans from obtaining equal access to healthcare as well. When compared to the overall poverty rate of Asian Americans (10.7%), the poverty rate of the Chinese remained higher. In 2006, the poverty rate for Chinese of all ages was 12%, with a 18% rate for Chinese people aged 65 and older.³ This disparity continues to raise a concern for the aging

Chinese seniors who will require more medical attention in their futures but lack the funds to afford it.

CANCER INCIDENCE RATES

Cancer is the leading cause of death for Asian Americans.⁵ The leading five cancers in Chinese men occur in the prostate, colon/rectum, lung, liver, and stomach; the leading five cancers in Chinese women occur in the breast, colon/rectum, lung, endometrium, and stomach.⁶

Cancer Incidence Rates, 1998-2002

Chinese Men (Table 1.1)

All cancers	348.8
Prostate	84.8
Colorectum	54.0
Lung	53.0
Liver	24.0
Stomach	18.3

Chinese Women (Table 1.2)

All cancers	270.4
Breast	77.6
Colorectum	40.2
Lung	29.7
Endometrium	12.0
Stomach	11.1

*Data from "Cancer and mortality patterns among specific Asian and Pacific Islander populations in the U.S.", By: Barry A. Miller, Kenneth C. Chu, Benjamin F. Hankey, Lynn A. G. Ries⁶

CANCER AND CHINESE MEN

Colorectal cancer is cancer of the colon and rectum. Studies show that the colorectal incidence rate for foreign-born Chinese American men is equivalent to that of White men in America.⁷ It is possible that these high incidence rates are linked to a newly adopted Western lifestyle and diet.

Liver cancer is a disease that can develop from hepatitis B. The incidence rates of this cancer in Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese populations are 1.7 to 11.3 times higher than rates for White Americans.⁸ In the United States, Chinese Americans have the highest rate of liver cancer.⁹ Due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the disease, many Chinese Americans have not been screened for hepatitis B. Therefore, it is crucial to educate this population about the disease to prevent it.

Nasopharyngeal cancer is a cancer of the nose and upper throat and is commonly found in the southeastern region of China in the Cantonese population.^{10 11} Although NPC is not listed as one of the five major cancers that affect Chinese Americans, it is still necessary to mention since the disease is commonly found in the U.S. Chinese population and affects males twice more than it does females.¹² It is unclear how the cancer is formed, but one particular research suggests it is related to a traditional Chinese diet. Consumption of salted fish and other preserved foods may increase risks for this cancer. Other risk factors for NPC include the Epstein-Barr virus, genetics, and possibly environments where there is a high exposure to wood particulates and formaldehyde.¹³

CANCER AND CHINESE WOMEN

Breast cancer rates are low in Chinese American women in comparison to White women,¹⁴ but it is still the leading cancer in the female Chinese American population.⁶ Low screening rates and late detection can be attributed to a number of different issues including poor health coverage, language inaccessibility, and programs lacking cultural sensitivity. Additionally, traditional cultural values of modesty have made mammograms a taboo and therefore prevent many women from performing self-breast examinations and getting screened.¹⁴

Lung cancer mortality rates for Chinese Americans are the highest in the Asian American community. Strangely enough, lung cancer is also the third leading cancer in Chinese American women although their smoking rates are low. Researchers suggest that exposure to second-hand smoke and the smoke from frying pans make them victims to the disease.¹⁵

Stomach cancer is the fifth most common cancer in both Chinese American men and women.⁶ Although the incidence rate is much lower in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the stomach cancer incidence rate in Chinese female immigrants to the U.S. are twice that of White American women in America.¹⁶

PREVENTION AND DETECTION

There are several prevention methods one can choose from to reduce the risks for cancer as well as other diseases linked to cancer like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. Cancer screenings are important since they can detect cancer early and prevent further health complications. Preventative vaccines are equally important since they can prevent certain viruses from developing into cancers. Available tests and vaccines include:

1. Fecal occult blood test (FOBT)-for colon and rectal cancers
2. Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) vaccine-for HBV disease and liver cancer
3. Self and clinical breast exams/Mammograms-for breast cancer
4. Pap smears-for cervical cancer
5. Prostate specific-antigen (PSA)-for prostate cancer

Adopting certain lifestyle behaviors can also deter the onset of cancer. Therefore, regular exercise, the elimination of tobacco use, the use of sunscreen in sunlight, and daily consumption of fruits, vegetables, and fibrous foods are habits that should be practiced regularly as recommended by health experts.

For more information, contact:

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