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Prevention to Reduce Cancer Risk

Did you know that less than 30% of your lifetime risk of getting cancer is due to factors that you have no control over? The rest you have the power to change, including your diet. (Harvard Men’s Health Watch, September 2016)

“It’s clearly a concern that cancer is the number one cause of death in Nebraska and has been for six years in a row” said Michele Bever, director of the South Heartland District Health Department.

“Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the South Heartland District of Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties,” Bever said. “However the incidence (meaning the frequency at which cancer occurs) and the mortality rates (rate of death) for most cancer types are higher here in the district than Nebraska overall, “

Lung, breast, colon/rectum, prostate, bladder, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, skin and pancreatic cancer were top cancers causing deaths in South Heartland residents from 2011-2015, according to Bever.

“The diagnosis of cancer can be a very stressful event for patients, families and communities” said Dorrann Hultman, community health services coordinator at the South Heartland District Health Department. “Cancer not only affects the patient’s physical health but also their mental well-being.”

Hultman said that Cancer is expensive to treat and requires a significant amount of time for appointments and treatments. There is often associated travel time and expense. Work schedules must be adjusted and in some instances a leave of absence may be necessary. “These requirements not only disrupt the life of the individual diagnosed with cancer but can also impact the workplace,” she said.

A 2012 survey of cancer survivors found that one-third of those surveyed had gone into debt. Of those that had gone into debt, 55% owed \$10,000 or more.

“It’s time we get serious about prevention,” Bever said. “Prevention means taking steps to prevent cancer before it starts!”

“The impact of lifestyle choices on cancer prevention should not be overlooked,” said Hultman. “Lifestyle choices include diet, exercise and choosing to vaccinate for Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).”

Making changes to improve our lifestyle choices is not easy; however, the benefits are significant, not just for cancer prevention alone but for prevention of other chronic diseases. Making healthy lifestyle choices each day can reduce cancer risk, cardiovascular risk, and improve one’s mental and physical health.

“If each of us makes a long-term commitment to our health and starts today with one small change, we can reduce our personal risk of cancer and impact cancer rates in our community,” Bever said.

“It’s also important that we avoid exposures that can increase the chance of developing cancer. Exposures include tobacco use, radon, sun damage and chemical exposure. We can also vaccinate for the human papillomavirus (HPV) to prevent cervical, head and neck cancers,” said Hultman.

Regular cancer screenings play an important role in early detection and treatment. Bever suggests that individuals should talk with their doctor about cancer screenings and when they should do them.

“Review your personal history, your family history and learn if genetic testing is recommended. If you don’t have insurance, contact SHDHD at 1-877-238-7595 to learn about programs that can help with cancer screenings and lifestyle change,” she said.

Hultman recommends to start today by making the commitment to live a healthy life style each and every day, by working with your doctor to review your current and past medical history, your family history and your current lifestyle to know your risks, then establish a plan for regular cancer screenings. “Don’t let cancer take you by surprise, put in the work to prevent it!” she said.

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