








# Cancer prevention & risk factors

## 1. RISK FACTORS

### What are risk factors and how can we avoid them?

Cancer is a major global health concern. Around 30-50% of cases can be prevented by raising awareness, increasing screening participation, and avoiding risk factors. The table below highlights the main risk factors.<sup>1</sup>

	RISK FACTOR	DETAILS	HOW TO AVOID (INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL ACTIONS)
	Tobacco	Tobacco smoke contains over 7 000 chemicals, 250 of which are harmful and 69 known to cause cancer. Globally, tobacco use is the largest avoidable risk factor for cancer mortality and claims more than 8 million lives annually.	Quitting/avoiding smoke and passive smoke exposure.
	Alcohol	Alcohol is a Group 1 carcinogen causally linked to seven types of cancer. It is associated with 740 000 new cancer cases each year globally. In 2020, alcohol consumption was estimated to cause 111 300 new cases of cancer in the EU (4.1% of all new cases). <sup>2</sup>	Avoiding alcohol consumption.
	Physical Inactivity, Dietary Factors, Obesity and Overweight	Excess weight and obesity are linked to numerous types of cancer. In Europe obesity is estimated to be directly responsible for at least 200 000 new cancer cases per year. <sup>3</sup>	Regular physical activity, healthy diet, maintaining a healthy body weight.
	Infections	Infections such as hepatitis and HPV can cause cancer and are responsible for up to 25% of cancer cases in low- and middle-income countries, including in the EU.	Vaccinations can reduce the risk of certain cancers.
	Environmental Pollution	Outdoor air pollution contributed to 4.2 million premature deaths worldwide in 2016, of which 6% were lung cancer deaths.	Avoiding cooking with or using solid fuels or kerosene, when possible walk or cycle instead of driving, to reduce emissions and improve your fitness.
	Occupational Carcinogens	Occupational carcinogens cause cancers such as lung cancer, mesothelioma, and bladder cancer. For instance, most mesothelioma cases are caused by work-related asbestos exposure.	Raised awareness on working conditions, use of protective equipment if working with dangerous substances.
	Radiation	Exposure to all types of ionizing radiation increases the risk of various types of cancer. Risks increase with exposure at a young age and higher exposure amount. UV radiation, particularly solar radiation, causes all major types of skin cancer.	Avoiding radiation, using UV protection (e.g. sunscreen and protective clothing).

1 World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/activities/preventing-cancer>

2 World Health Organization

3 WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022



## Self-Assessment Checklist

- Avoiding these risk factors will help you to reduce significantly the chance of developing cancer later in life. But, what measures are you taking now? The checklist below is a self-assessment designed to give you some indications on potential risk factors in your life and actions that could help you avoid or reduce exposure to them.
- Place a tick next to the environmental and/or behavioural categories that best apply to you and the actions you have taken thus far. Each category is worth one point. Calculate your risk by totalling both columns. If the number in the risk column is greater than the number in the action column, then you should take action to reduce your exposure to risk factors.

RISK FACTORS		ACTION REQUIRED	
Smoking and use of tobacco	<input type="checkbox"/>	Quit smoking and tobacco consumption	<input type="checkbox"/>
Smoke exposure/ passive smoking	<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoid smoking areas and smokers	<input type="checkbox"/>
Obesity and excess weight	<input type="checkbox"/>	Take action to be a healthy body weight	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical inactivity/ no exercise	<input type="checkbox"/>	Limit time spent sitting / Exercise regularly	<input type="checkbox"/>
Poor/unbalanced diet	<input type="checkbox"/>	Eat nutritious food and avoid processed goods or food with high fat/sugar content	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alcohol consumption	<input type="checkbox"/>	Limit your intake - No alcohol is best	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sun exposure	<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoid too much sun (especially for children) / Use sun protection / Do not use sunbeds	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carcinogenic substances in the workplace	<input type="checkbox"/>	Find out what they are and avoid exposure	<input type="checkbox"/>
Radiation at home <sup>4</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Find out if you are exposed, and take action to reduce high radon levels	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not getting checked	<input type="checkbox"/>	Take part in regular cancer screenings	<input type="checkbox"/>

4 Rock and soil produce radon gas. Sources of radon in the home can include building materials, or water and natural gas supply.

## 2. PREVENTION

Cancer prevention refers to the proactive steps taken to reduce the chances of developing cancer. This involves adopting and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, such as eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, and avoiding harmful substances known to cause cancer. It also includes the use of medications or vaccines that can help prevent certain types of cancer. By actively engaging in these preventive measures, you can reduce your risk of developing cancer and promote overall well-being.

## 3. THE EUROPEAN CODE AGAINST CANCER

The European Code against Cancer is a dynamic initiative by the European Commission, aimed at empowering individuals with actionable steps to lower their cancer risk. It presents twelve practical recommendations that anyone can incorporate into their daily lives without the need for specialized knowledge or guidance.

For accessibility, these points are available in all EU languages. Embracing these recommendations, can significantly reduce your chances of developing cancer. In fact, research suggests that following these guidelines could potentially prevent nearly half of all cancer-related deaths in Europe.

This initiative is a key component in a wider scheme led by the European Commission to prevent cancer in the 27 EU Member States and beyond.

