

CANCER CONCERNS AMONG STAFF IN SCHOOLS

Frequently Asked Questions

When an employee or several employees in a school are diagnosed with cancer, people often suspect that the cancers are caused by hazardous substances in their indoor environment. This may lead to the perception that there is an unusually large number of individuals with cancer in their school. The New Jersey Department of Health is often contacted to investigate because of this increased awareness about cancer and the search for possible causes. This fact sheet addresses common cancer concerns among staff in schools.

Q: Why does it seem like there is an unusual number of people getting cancer in my school?

A. Unfortunately, cancer is very common. Cancer is not just one disease. There are many different types of cancers and the risk factors vary for each type of cancer. The chances of being diagnosed with cancer increases drastically with age. As we age, the incidence (number of new cancers diagnosed) increases and more of our older peers may be diagnosed with cancer. Therefore, it is not unusual to know several people with cancer at a particular workplace, especially one with an aging population.

Q: How common is cancer?

A. Cancer is more common than many people realize. The National Cancer Institute estimates that 38 percent of men and women will be diagnosed with cancer at some time in their lives. Since more than 1 out of 3 people will develop cancer over the course of their lifetime, cancer will affect most workplaces. Given these statistics, it is not unusual for someone to know several people in his or her workplace who have been diagnosed with cancer.



Q: There are a few people I work with who were recently diagnosed with a few different types of cancer. Does this mean there is something at the school causing these cancers?

A. Cancer is composed of a group of more than 100 different diseases that begin with uncontrolled growth and the spread of abnormal cells. There is not a simple explanation of what causes cancer. These different types of cancers have different rates of occurrence and different causes. Therefore, we cannot assume that all of the different types of cancers in a community or workplace share a common cause.

Q: Is there a relationship with being diagnosed with cancer and age?

A. The risk of having cancer is related to age. While cancers occur in people of all ages, the risk of developing cancer increases as we age. Cancer is more common in people over 45 years of age and even more common in people over 60 years of age. When a workplace consists primarily of people in these age categories, we may observe more employees with cancer than in other workplaces with a younger workforce.

Q: What are the most common types of cancer?

A. According to the New Jersey State Cancer Registry (NJSCR), the 10 most common types of cancer diagnosed among men and women in New Jersey during 2019 were as follows (1=most common):

► New Jersey: Men, 2019 (NJSCR)

Ranking	Cancer Site/Type
1	Prostate
2	Lung and Bronchus
3	Colon and Rectum
4	Urinary Bladder
5	Melanoma of the Skin
6	Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma
7	Kidney and Renal Pelvis
8	Leukemia
9	Oral Cavity and Pharynx
10	Pancreas

► New Jersey: Women, 2019 (NJSCR)

Ranking	Cancer Site/Type
1	Breast
2	Lung and Bronchus
3	Colon and Rectum
4	Corpus and Uterus, NOS
5	Thyroid
6	Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma
7	Melanoma of the Skin
8	Pancreas
9	Leukemia
10	Kidney and Renal Pelvis

NOTE: New Jersey cancer incidence data from NJSCR may be accessed online at: <https://www.nj.gov/health/ces/>.

Q: What are the risk factors for cancer?

A. It is usually not possible to know exactly why one person develops cancer and another person does not. But research has shown that certain risk factors may increase a person's chances of developing cancer. Although some of these risk factors can be avoided, others include things people cannot control, such as growing older or having a family history of cancer. Cancer risk factors include exposure to chemicals or other substances, as well as certain behaviors, like smoking, obesity, and heavy alcohol use.

Q: What can I do to reduce my cancer risk?

A. Limiting your exposure to avoidable risk factors, such as heavy alcohol use, smoking, obesity, sunlight, and infectious disease may lower your risk of developing certain cancers. Research also suggests that dietary choices may increase or decrease your risk of cancer. For more information on how you can reduce your risk of getting cancer please refer to this website: <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk>.

Q: Does the presence of a hazardous substance pose a risk?

A. In order for a hazardous substance to cause cancer, there must be an exposure pathway for the contaminant to enter the human body through breathing air, ingesting food or water, or skin contact.

Q: Does an exposure to a hazardous substance always cause cancer?

A. Many factors influence whether a person exposed to a carcinogen (cancer-causing agent) will develop cancer, including the amount and duration of the exposure and the individual's genetic background. Cancers caused by involuntary exposures to environmental carcinogens are most likely to occur in subgroups of the population, such as workers in certain industries who may be exposed to carcinogens on the job.

Q: How many cancers are caused by involuntary exposure to carcinogens in the environment?

A. This question cannot be answered with certainty because the precise causes of most cancers are not known. Some researchers have suggested that, in most populations, environmental exposures are responsible for a relatively small proportion of total cancers (less than 4 percent), whereas other researchers attribute a higher proportion (19 percent) to environmental exposures. For more information, please refer to this website: <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/substances/carcinogens>.