

## Debunking 7 cancer myths



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We have all heard stories about the unsuspecting victims of cancer who, despite eating healthily and exercising regularly, are stricken by cancer and forced to seek medical treatment anyway.

For many people, cancer seems to strike like a game of lottery, where the chosen ones simply have a case of 'biological bad luck'.

However, thinking about cancer this way could be dangerous as studies have shown that a person can increase their risk of getting cancer through lifestyle choices.

We speak to Dr Sue Lo, director of The Harley Street Heart & Cancer Centre, about 7 common myths about cancer.

### **Myth 1: Microwaving plastic containers and wraps releases harmful, cancer-causing substances into food.**

Dr Lo says: Microwave-safe plastic containers and wraps are safe to use in the microwave.

However, plastic containers not intended for use in the microwave could melt and potentially leak chemicals into your food.

You should avoid microwaving containers that were never intended for the microwave, such as margarine tubs, takeout containers or whipped topping bowls.

Always check to see that any container you use in the microwave is labelled as microwave-safe.

### **Myth 2: I can get cancer from using a mobile phone.**

Dr Lo says: Studies on the link between mobile phone use and cancer have not been conclusive.

According to [American Cancer Society](#) (ACS), the World Health Organisation's classification of mobile phones shows that there could be some risk associated with cancer, but the evidence is not strong enough and the link needs to be investigated further.

The [US Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA), which is responsible for regulating the safety of machines and devices that emit radiation (including mobiles), has also said that studies reporting biological changes associated with radiofrequency energy have failed to be replicated.

The majority of human epidemiologic studies, according to FDA, have failed to show a relationship between exposure to radiofrequency energy from mobile phones and health problems.

Nevertheless, those who are concerned about radiofrequency exposure can limit their exposure by using an earpiece and limiting mobile phone use, particularly among children.

**Myth 3: Natural or alternative medicine might be better at treating cancer than radiotherapy or chemotherapy.**

Dr Lo says: Alternative cancer treatments may not play a direct role in curing cancer, but they may help a patient cope with signs and symptoms caused by cancer and cancer treatments.

Common signs and symptoms such as anxiety, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, pain, difficulty sleeping, and stress may be lessened by alternative treatments.

Integrating the best of evidence-based complementary and alternative cancer treatments with the treatments you receive from your doctor may help relieve many of the symptoms associated with cancer and its treatment.

Patients should discuss their options with their doctor to determine which strategies might work, and which are likely to have no benefit.

While complementary and alternative cancer treatments, such as acupuncture, may reduce nausea or pain, they generally aren't powerful enough to replace cancer medications from your doctor.

**Myth 4: Oral contraceptives, like the Pill, cause cancer even though they can sometimes prevent ovarian and uterine cases of cancer.**

Dr Lo says: Naturally occurring oestrogen and progesterone have been found to influence the development and growth of some [cancers](#). Because birth control pills contain female hormones, there has been some interest in determining whether there is any link between widely-used contraceptives and cancer risk.

However, the results have not always been consistent. Overall, the risks of [endometrial](#) and [ovarian cancer](#) appear to be reduced with the use of oral contraceptives, whereas the risks of [breast](#), [cervical](#), and [liver cancer](#) appear to be increased.

**Myth 5: There is a blood test to see if you have cancer in your body.**

Dr Lo says: If it's suspected that you have cancer, your doctor may order certain cancer blood tests or other laboratory tests, such as an analysis of your urine or a biopsy of a suspicious area, to help guide the diagnosis.

With the exception of blood cancers, blood tests generally can't absolutely tell whether you have cancer or some other non-cancerous condition, but they can give your doctor clues about what's going on inside your body.

**Myth 6: If I'm under 40, I'm too young to have cancer.**

Dr Lo says: Cancer is indeed less common in adolescents and young adults than in older people, but in some ways it is more alarming.

The rates of some cancers, including colorectal, thyroid and testicular, are rising in people ages 20 to 39, according to the [American Cancer Society \(ACS\)](#).

A report released in August by the [National Cancer Institute](#) and [Lance Armstrong Foundation](#) found that even as cancer survival rates continued to improve in adults of middle age and older, the survival rates for people ages 15 to 39 had not risen substantially in more than two decades.

Cancer is the fourth-leading killer in that age group, behind accidents, [suicides](#) and homicides.

In 2006, there were approximately 55,200 new cases of cancer in Americans age 15 to 39, and 9,300 cancer deaths in that same group, according to ACS.

**Myth 7: There is nothing I can do to prevent getting cancer.**

Dr Lo says: Global, regional and national policies and programmes that promote healthy lifestyles are

essential to reducing cancers that are caused by factors such as the harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diets and a lack of physical activity.

Tobacco use, the most common risk factor, is linked to 71 per cent of lung cancer deaths and accounts for at least 22 per cent of all cancer deaths. Based on current trends, tobacco use is estimated to kill one billion people in the 21st century.

Alcohol is also a known risk factor for cancer. It is strongly linked with an increased risk of cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, bowel and breast, and may also increase the risk of liver cancer and bowel cancer in women.

Being overweight and obese is also strongly linked to increased risks of bowel, breast, uterine, pancreatic, oesophagus, kidney and gall bladder cancers.

The rate of obesity is increasing globally at an alarming rate, including among children and adolescents.

Rising rates of obesity will lead to increased cancer rates unless policies and actions are taken to improve people's diets and levels of physical activity.

[Dr Sue Lo, senior medical oncologist and director of The Harley Street Heart & Cancer Centre, has been treating cancer patients for 18 years.](#)

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