



cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345

Determining if Something Is a

- Medical treatments (radiation and medicines including chemotherapy, hormone drugs, drugs that suppress the immune system, etc.)
- Workplace exposures
- Household exposures
- Pollution

Some carcinogens cause cancer by changing a cell's DNA. Others do not affect DNA directly, but lead to cancer in other ways. For example, they may cause cells to divide at a faster than normal rate, which could increase the chances that DNA changes will occur.

Carcinogens do not cause cancer in every case, all the time. Some clearly raise a person's risk of one or more types of cancer. But **even the strongest carcinogens don't raise the risk of all types of cancer.**

Substances labeled as carcinogens can have different levels of cancer-causing potential. Some might increase cancer risk after only a short exposure, but others might only cause cancer after prolonged, high levels of exposure. And for any particular person, the risk of developing cancer depends on many factors, including how they are exposed to a carcinogen, the length and intensity of the exposure, and the person's genetic makeup.

How do researchers determine if something is a carcinogen?

Testing to see if something can cause cancer is often difficult. It isn't ethical to test a substance by exposing people to it and seeing if they get cancer from it. Instead, scientists must use other types of tests, such as lab tests on cell cultures and animals, or epidemiology studies, which look at human populations. These types of tests might not always give clear answers.

Deciding what substances to test

There are far too many substances (both natural and man-made) to test each one, so scientists use what is already known about chemical structures, results from other types of lab tests, the extent of human exposure, and other factors to select chemicals for testing. For example, they can often get an idea about whether a substance might cause a problem by comparing it to similar chemicals that have already been studied.

What lab studies can show

Scientists get much of their data about whether something might cause cancer from lab studies of cell cultures and animals.

Lab studies alone can't always predict if a substance will cause cancer in people.

However, almost all carcinogens are first tested on and found to cause cancer in lab animals then are later found to cause cancer in people.

Most studies of potential carcinogens expose the lab animals to doses that are much higher than common human exposures. This is so that cancer risk can be detected in relatively small groups of animals. It isn't always clear if the results from animal studies will be the same for people when they are normally exposed to a substance. For example, the effects seen in lab studies with very high doses of a substance may not be the same at much lower doses, or the effects of a substance when it is inhaled may not be the same as if it is applied to the skin. Also, the bodies of lab animals and humans don't always process substances in the same way.

But for safety reasons, it's usually assumed that exposures that cause cancer at larger doses in animals may also cause cancer in people. It isn't always possible to know how the exposure dose might affect risk, but it is reasonable for public health purposes to assume that lowering human exposure will reduce risk.

What epidemiology studies (studies in people) can show

Another important way to identify carcinogens is through **epidemiology studies**, which look at different groups of people to determine which factors might be linked to cancer. These studies also provide useful information, but they have their limits. Humans don't live in a controlled environment. People are exposed to all kinds of substances at any given time, including those they encounter at work, school, or home; in the food they eat; and in the air they breathe. What's more, these can change over time. This can make it very hard to determine which of these factors might be linked to cancer.

By combining data from both types of studies, scientists do their best to make an educated assessment of whether something can cause cancer.

- When the evidence is conclusive, the exposure or substance is labeled as a *carcinogen*.
- When the available evidence is compelling but not felt to be conclusive, the exposure or substance may be labeled as a *probable carcinogen*.
- When there is limited evidence that is far from being conclusive, the exposure or substance may be labeled as a *possible carcinogen*.

But in some cases there simply isn't enough information to be certain one way or the

- Known to be human carcinogens
- Reasonably anticipated to be human carcinogens

The current version of the RoC includes about 250 substances and exposures, which are listed [here](#)⁴.

The most recent RoC, which includes a summary profile for each listed substance, can be found online at <https://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/pubhealth/roc/index-1.html>⁵.

Other agencies and groups

Other federal agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the CDC's

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/understanding-cancer-risk/known-and-probable-human-carcinogens.html
2. monographs.iarc.fr/agents-classified-by-the-iarc/
3. monographs.iarc.who.int/monographs-available/
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/understanding-cancer-risk/known-and-probable-human-carcinogens.html
5. ntp.niehs.nih.gov/pubhealth/roc/index-1.html
6. www.iarc.fr
7. monographs.iarc.fr
8. ntp.niehs.nih.gov

Factors: www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/causes¹⁵

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

Website: www.cdc.gov/niosh¹⁶ NIOSH Safety and Health Topic – Occupational Cancer: www.cdc.gov/niosh/cancer/about/index.html¹⁷

**Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.*

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at **1-800-227-2345** or visit www.cancer.org¹⁸.

References

International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). *Agents Classified by the IARC Monographs, Volumes 1–123*. 2019. Accessed at <https://monographs.iarc.fr/agents-classified-by-the-iarc/> on March 12, 2019.

International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). *Preamble to the IARC Monographs*. 2019. Accessed at <https://monographs.iarc.fr/preamble-to-the-iarc-monographs/> on March 12, 2019.

US Department of Health and Human Services. Public Health Service, National Toxicology Program. *Report on Carcinogens, Fourteenth Edition*. 2016. Accessed at <http://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/pubhealth/roc/index-1.html> on March 12, 2019.

Last Revised: May 17, 2019

Written by

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team
(<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html>)

American Cancer Society medical information is copyrighted material. For reprint requests, please see our Content Usage Policy (www.cancer.org/about-us/policies/content-usage.html).

cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345