

## 5 Scary Cancer Questions, Answered

These days, it [seems](#) like you can't turn on the TV or surf the Web without coming across yet another [new cancer report](#). It's overwhelming and often confusing: For instance, one day we hear that wine is good for heart health, but the next we learn that too much is a risk factor for breast cancer. What to do but just drink a toast to luck? Seriously, who can keep up? All this back and forth raises a lot of questions for the editors here at SELF, and we figured it must have the same effect on our readers. So we asked women to send us their [top cancer-related concerns](#), then took them to the experts for clarification. The good news: All that new research we keep hearing about, baffling though it may be, is yielding some clear—and reassuring—answers.

**Q: I can't always find—or afford—organic produce. How harmful are the pesticides in nonorganic foods?**

A: People who consistently eat a [diet high in fruit and vegetables](#) have lower cancer risk—whether the produce is organic or not, according to David Katz, M.D., director of the Yale Prevention Research Center in New Haven, Connecticut. That said, Dr. Katz does think it makes sense to keep pesticide exposure to a minimum, because experts aren't sure how—if at all—it affects cancer risk. About 3 percent of domestic products and 4 percent of imported products had pesticide levels of concern, according to a 2007 [FDA](#) report. Some items such as apples, bell peppers and spinach contain higher levels of pesticides than others, possibly because they have more permeable skin or more is taken in through their root systems, so use [our shopping list](#) the next time you hit the grocery store for guidance on when it's best to opt for organic.

**Q: I've read that [sunscreen can actually cause cancer](#)—is that true?**

A: Sunscreen is still a must. Period. But controversy flared after a report by the Environmental Working Group claimed that 41 percent of sunscreens contain a form of [vitamin A](#) (retinyl palmitate) that may speed the development of skin tumors and lesions when exposed to...sunlight! The American Academy of Dermatology criticized the analysis because the data was from research conducted on mice, and it's unclear if it's applicable to humans. Not all sunscreens contain the chemical in question, so if you're concerned, opt for those made with zinc oxide, titanium dioxide or Mexoryl. Bonus: These ingredients are less likely to break down than others, so the protection lasts longer.

**Q: I drink bottled water all the time, but I keep hearing that some bottles contain dangerous chemicals. Should I be worried?**

A: In this case, it's valid to be concerned. BPA, a chemical often found in plastic water and baby bottles and metal cans—even cash register receipts—has been linked to increased risk for breast cancer and heart disease. “BPA acts as a weak estrogen, which can spur the growth of cancerous cells,” says Hugh Taylor, M.D., professor of [obstetrics](#), gynecology and reproductive sciences at Yale University Medical Center. Whenever possible, give plastic water bottles a pass and sip from glass or steel containers instead (I often choose a metal commuter cup); use baby bottles that are labeled BPA-free (fortunately these are widely available); and avoid plastics with the code 7 on the bottom—those are more likely to contain BPA. Also, opt for fresh or frozen foods instead of canned ones (most cans are lined with BPA-epoxy liner), and wash your hands after handling receipts.

**Q: Is it true that three bad [sunburns](#) guarantees you'll get skin cancer?**

A: Not exactly, but your risk for skin cancer, including melanoma, dramatically increases if you have had five or more severe sunburns that blister. “The more sun exposure you get, the more DNA damage to your skin, which can lead to cancerous changes,” explains Kevin Pinski, M.D., associate professor of dermatology at Northwestern University Medical School. It's not only burning that puts you at risk. Cumulative exposure ( repeated sunbathing without burning) is linked to basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas. You can't reverse all your past exposure, but you can prevent future damage: Wear protective clothing (like long sleeves) and get your tan from a tube, *not* a tanning bed! Remember: The only safe tan is a *fake* tan.

**Q: Cancer rates seem to be skyrocketing—what's going on?**

A: Despite scary headlines, rates of many cancers are going down in this country, Michael Thun, M.D., an [epidemiologist](#) at the American Cancer Society in Atlanta, assured us. Breast cancer incidence rates have dropped 11 percent since 1999; experts say that's because women stopped using hormone-replacement therapy after studies linked it to cancer. Fewer women have had colon cancer over the past two decades thanks to better screening. And ovarian and uterine cancers are less common because women are taking [birth control pills](#) for longer periods of time. (The Pill prevents [ovulation](#), which is thought to trigger cell damage and raise the risk for tumors.) More encouraging news: If you do get cancer, you're more likely to beat it. Breast cancer

death rates are down 30 percent, thanks to earlier detection and better treatments. And five-year survival rates for all cancers are up almost 20 percent. With research and advocacy, we can lower those numbers more every day.

Don't see your top cancer-related question here? Go to [Self.com](https://www.self.com), or send your queries to [lucy@self.com](mailto:lucy@self.com) and we'll try to answer them in a future issue of SELF!