



Exposing the culprit of Cancer Alley

It happens every time. Folks are always asking me how to prevent cancer. But when I advise them that their best defense is to quit smoking, the topic of conversation shifts to the proverbial Uncle Bob or Aunt Harriet.

"She smoked like a chimney, lived to be 99, and was never sick a day in her life," is a refrain I've heard more times than I care to remember.

Make no mistake about it: Some of us will live to be a ripe old age despite poor health habits. The genes we inherit from our parents are an important factor in determining our longevity.

But that doesn't mean our health and life span is predetermined by a roll of the genetic dice. There is, in fact, a great deal we can do to reduce our risk of cancer and other chronic diseases.

Unfortunately, this is where the

information can be overwhelming. We hear every day about a new cancer scare. Coffee, artificial sweeteners, hair dyes, electric power lines, insecticides, tap water and the air we breathe

have all be blamed for causing cancer.

But, according to the experts, only 6 percent of all cancers are the result of environmental and occupational causes such as chemicals, asbestos, and radiation. The real concern lies in diet, smoking and other lifestyle factors that account for two-thirds of all cancers.

Here in Louisiana, air and water pollution are often held account-

able for our higher-than-average cancer rates. However, if we eliminated these factors tomorrow, there would still be a "Cancer Alley" in the Bayou State. Research overwhelmingly indicates that smoking, drinking, and poor eating habits are the real culprits in Louisiana.

Efforts to improve environmental and occupational conditions are certainly beneficial. But to make a significant dent in our cancer problems, we must attack the two-thirds of all cancers that are preventable by lifestyle changes.

Of course, it's human nature to blame someone else for our problems rather than take charge of our own lives. But the time has come for Louisianians to wake up, smell the coffee, and kick those bad habits.

We've got to get the right attitude — and we're not talking about our much-celebrated "laissez les bons temps rouler" attitude, either. Smoking and chewing tobacco, abusing alcohol, and eating a diet high in calories, salt, and fat — and low in fresh fruits and vegetables

— are what's really killing us.

With that warning in mind, here's my list of the seven most important steps you can take to live a long and healthy life:

- Don't chew tobacco.
- Drink in moderation, if at all.
- Eat five servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Clinical stud-

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consistently demonstrate that cancer incidence increases as the amount of fruits and vegetables in the diet decreases. There appear to be chemical compounds in fruits and vegetables that fight naturally occurring substances in our environment that cause cancer. Let the power of fruits and vegetables go to work for you.

• **Maintain a normal body weight.** Being overweight is associated with some forms of cancer and is also a risk factor for heart disease, stroke, hypertension, and diabetes.

• **Reduce total fat in your diet to 30 percent or less of the total calories.** High levels of fat in the

EXECUTIVE HEALTH
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