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Cancer Update From Johns Hopkins - Email Hoax

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STATEMENT: EMAIL HOAX REGARDING CANCER

Information falsely attributed to Johns Hopkins called, "CANCER UPDATE FROM JOHN HOPKINS" describes properties of cancer cells and suggests ways of preventing cancer. Johns Hopkins did not publish the information, which often is an email attachment, nor do we endorse its contents. The email also contains an incorrect spelling of our institution as "John" Hopkins; whereas, the correct spelling is "Johns" Hopkins. For more information about cancer, please read the information on our web site or visit the National Cancer Institute's web site at www.cancer.gov. Please help combat the spread of this **hoax** by letting others know of this statement.

Another **hoax** email that has been circulating since 2004 regarding plastic containers, bottles, wrap claiming that heat releases dioxins which cause cancer also was not published by Johns Hopkins. More information from the [Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#).

Mythbusters: Please help curb the spread of this hoax by sending a link to this page to individuals that forward you this email.

The Truth about the "Cancer Update" Email

It has become such a problem, that the National Cancer Institute, American Cancer Society, and individual cancer centers like the Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center have posted warnings on their Web sites. Emails offering easy remedies for avoiding and curing cancer are the latest Web-influenced trend. To gain credibility, the anonymous authors falsely attribute their work to respected research institutions like Johns Hopkins. This is the case with the so-called "Cancer Update from Johns Hopkins."

The gist of this viral email is that cancer therapies of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy do not work against the disease and people should instead choose a variety of dietary strategies.

Traditional therapies, such as surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy, work. The evidence is the millions of cancer survivors in the United States today who are alive because of these therapies. We recognize that treatments don't work in every patient, or sometimes work for awhile and then stop working, and there are some cancers that are more difficult to cure than others. These problems are the focus of ongoing cancer research.

We'll go through each statement in the email **hoax** and provide real responses from Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center experts.

Email hoax contentions #1 and 2: Everyone Has Cancer Cells

Cancer is a genetic disease resulting from a variety of mutations and alterations either inherited from our parents or, more commonly, acquired over time due to environmental exposures and behaviors, such as smoking and poor diet. These alterations turn off important cell growth regulators allowing cells to continually divide unchecked, explains [Luis Diaz](#), a clinician-scientist in Ludwig Center for Cancer Genetics. This type of cell is called a malignant or cancer cell. Among the trillions of cells in the human body, inevitably everyone has some abnormal or atypical cells that possess some of the characteristics of cancer cells, most resolve themselves and never result in cancer, says Diaz.

There is no single or standard test for cancer. There are ways to screen for certain cancers with tests such as colonoscopy for colon cancer, mammography for breast cancer, PSA for prostate cancer, and the Pap smear for cervical cancer, and these tests can detect cancers in a very early and curable stage. For many cancers, there currently are no screening tests, and they are diagnosed when they begin to cause symptoms.

Diaz and other Kimmel Cancer Center researchers are working on new tests that detect abnormal DNA shed by cancer cells into blood and body fluids and have the ability to find cancers before they cause any symptoms. Approaches like this could lead to a broad-based screening test for cancer.

Tests like these also are being used to detect cancer recurrences and malignant cells left behind following surgery, and can find cancers that are not detectable under the microscope or in x-rays.

Other researchers are studying cancer stem cells. They are stealth cells that make up just a tiny fraction of a tumor. While small in number, investigators believe they may be the cells that drive certain cancers and lead to cancer recurrence. Therapies that target these cells are now being tested in clinical trials.

A team of our breast cancer researchers has developed a method that could make it possible to detect breast cancer from the DNA contained in a single drop of blood.

But, while evasive cancer cells are a challenge and the focus of ongoing research, it does not mean, as the email contends, that all patients, even those treated successfully for cancer, have cancers-in-waiting—undetectable but still there. People are treated and completely cured of cancer everyday.

Email hoax contention #3: A Strong Immune System Destroys Cancer

When it comes to cancer and the immune system, it is not a matter of strong or weak as the fictional report contends, but rather an issue of recognition. "The immune system simply does not recognize cancer. In its complexity, the cancer cell has learned to disguise itself to the immune system as a normal, healthy cell. Cells infected with viruses or bacteria send out danger signals setting the immune system in action. But cancer cells do not," explains Elizabeth Jaffee, co-director of cancer immunology and leading expert on cancer and the immune system." By deciphering the methods cancer cells use to make them invisible to the immune system, Jaffee and team have developed cancer vaccines that have successfully triggered immune reactions against prostate cancer, pancreatic cancer, leukemia, and multiple myeloma.

Email hoax contention #4 and #5: Cancer is caused by Nutritional Deficiencies and Supplements Will Correct Them

Dietary habits and lifestyle choices, such as smoking, contribute to the development of many human cancers, says Kimmel Cancer Center director [William Nelson](#). Our experts recommend a balanced diet (see response #11) as a way of reducing cancer risk. In terms of supplements, Nelson points out that while they may help mediate vitamin deficiencies, taking doses above what the body needs provides no added benefit.

Email hoax contentions #6, 7, 8, 9, and 10: Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy Harms Normal Cells. Surgery Causes Cancer to Spread

Chemotherapy and radiation therapy kills cancer cells with remarkable selectivity, says Nelson. There are some temporary and reversible side effects common to cancer therapies, including hair loss and low blood counts. Limiting and managing these side effects is an integral part of treatment.

Surgery is the first line of treatment for many types of cancer. It does not cause cancer to spread. Cancers spread to other tissues and organs as a tumor progresses and cancer cells break away from the original tumor and travel through the bloodstream to other body sites.

Email hoax contentions #11, 12, 13, and 14: Cancers Feed on Certain Foods

The premise is that cancer cells feed on certain foods, and if a person refrains from eating these foods, the cancer will die. According to our experts, a poor diet and obesity associated with a poor diet is a risk factor for the development of cancer. However, there is no evidence that certain foods alter the environment of an existing cancer, at the cellular level, and cause it to either die or grow.

While there is such a thing as tumors that produce mucus, the mucus made by a tumor does not result from drinking

milk. And, eating less meat, while a good choice for cancer prevention, does not free up enzymes to attack cancer cells, explains cancer prevention and control expert Elizabeth Platz.

Moderation is key, says Platz. As part of a balanced diet, sugar, salt, milk, coffee, tea, meat, and chocolate—the foods the “Update” calls into question—are all safe choices, she says. The real concern with many of these, particularly sugar, is that it adds calories to a diet and can lead to obesity, and obesity is a major risk factor for cancer. A balanced nutritious diet, healthy weight, physical activity, and avoiding alcoholic drinks may prevent as many as 1/3 of all cancers. Platz recommends eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables per day and limiting red and processed meats, like hot dogs.

Several Johns Hopkins experts participated in the World Cancer Research Fund - American Institute for Cancer Research report *Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and the Prevention of Cancer: A Global Perspective*, published in November 2007, which is considered by cancer prevention experts to be an authoritative source of information on diet, physical activity and cancer. Their recommendations for cancer prevention and for good health in general are:

1. Be as lean as possible without becoming underweight.
2. Be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day.
3. Avoid sugary drinks. Limit consumption of energy-dense foods (particularly processed foods high in added sugar, or low in fiber, or high in fat).
4. Eat more of a variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and legumes such as beans.
5. Limit consumption of red meats (such as beef, pork and lamb) and avoid processed meats.
6. If consumed at all, limit alcoholic drinks to 2 for men and 1 for women a day.
7. Limit consumption of salty foods and foods processed with salt (sodium).
8. Don't use supplements to protect against cancer.

Our experts recommend that people meet their nutritional needs through their food choices. While vitamin supplements can be helpful in people with nutritional deficiencies, evidence suggests that supplementation above what the body can use provides no added health benefit.

Email hoax contention #15: Cancer is a Disease of Mind, Body, and Spirit

Cancer is a disease caused by genetic alterations. Many times, these alterations occur through our own behaviors—cigarette smoking, a poor and unbalanced diet, virus exposures, and sunburns, says cancer prevention and control expert John Groopman.

How stress, faith, and other factors influence this is largely unknown. We would like people to be happy, loving, and stress free, simply because it is a nice way to live and can contribute to an overall feeling of well being, says Platz. There is no evidence, however, that a person prevents or causes cancer based on his or her state of mind.

Still, we understand that a cancer diagnosis can make patients and families feel stressed and anxious, and these are not pleasant feelings. So, we offer extensive patient and family services, including a cancer counseling center, pain and palliative care program, chaplain services and a meditation chapel, an image recovery center, and the Art of Healing art and music program.

Email hoax contention #16: Oxygen Kills Cancer Cells

Platz recommends regular exercise as a part of any healthy lifestyle, but says there is no evidence that breathing deeply or receiving oxygen therapy prevents cancer.

On its Web site, the American Cancer Society includes the following statement about oxygen therapy, “Available scientific evidence does not support claims that putting oxygen-releasing chemicals into a person's body is effective in treating cancer. It may even be dangerous. There have been reports of patient deaths from this method.” [Read more](#)

Please pass this information on to family and friends.

Questions?

Contact:

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