If you smoke, it's time to quit. If you're breathing second-hand smoke at home, it's time to help that smoker quit. This is your wake-up call: smoking kills.

Lung cancer kills more men and women than breast and prostate cancer combined. In fact, it's the leading cause of cancer deaths worldwide, and has increased steadily since the 1930s when smoking, the main factor spurring development of the disease, became a popular habit.
Smoking leads to lung cancer in two ways. First, merely inhaling smoke will prevent the natural cleansing and protective processes continually occurring in our lungs. Thousands of tiny, finger-like projections (called cilia) line the lungs and are covered with sticky mucus. The cilia trap inhaled foreign particles and work to sweep them up and out of the lungs. When you smoke, the cilia disappear and the upper layer of tissues thickens to protect the underlying layers.

Second, the toxic chemicals and irritating particles that haven't been cleared from the lungs lead to abnormal cell development and, over time, may develop into cancerous tumours.

RISK FACTORS FOR NONSMOKERS, TOO
Lung cancer is a disease of the elderly. Most cases are diagnosed in those 65 years or older, and women seem to be more at risk than men. Exposure to second-hand smoke, also known as passive smoking, will increase risk to twice that of a nonsmoker. Health Canada estimates at least 330 nonsmokers die each year from lung cancer due to second-hand smoke.

Environmental factors also play a role. Exposure to lung irritants such as asbestos, coal tar, silica, or nickel dust increase lung cancer risk. Radon gas is believed to account for approximately 12 percent of lung cancer deaths in the US. Radon is naturally emitted from some soils as uranium is broken down. It may enter homes through pipes, drains, or breaks in the foundation. Air pollution from smog, industrial activities, and vehicles is estimated to cause a small percentage of lung cancers each year, as well.

A family history of lung cancer may increase risk, as will a personal history of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

However, since smoking is estimated to cause 87 percent of lung cancer cases, stay smoke-free! It's essential to preserve your health and that of those around you.

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AIR POLLUTION, ATHLETES, AND LUNG CANCER RISK

Although there is no guaranteed way to prevent lung cancer, we can reduce our risk.

- Don't smoke, and if you do smoke, quit! Pick your quit date, gather the support of friends and family, and join an online support group to ensure you can successfully kick the habit. Changing your habits related to smoking is an absolute must. If at first you don't succeed, forgive yourself and try again. Most people try a number of times before becoming smoke-free.

- Acupuncture and hypnosis may be helpful when quitting, as is exercise.

- Purchase a radon detector for your home or contact the provincial department of health for more information about radon testing.

- Wear a mask when exposed to dust, harmful chemicals, or other potentially dangerous compounds at work or home.

- Get plenty of phytonutrients, present in fruits and vegetables. These can help protect us from lung cancer. Consume at least three servings of fruits and six servings of vegetables daily.

Other health-promoting dietary changes include reducing your consumption of potential food allergens and avoiding excess alcohol.

- Enjoy moderate sunlight exposure and take 1,000 IU of vitamin D daily. According to researchers from the Harvard School of Medicine, lung cancer patients with sufficient vitamin D were found to have better survival rates.

- Use antioxidants such as n-acetylcysteine, an amino acid that can detoxify and decongest the lungs, and resveratrol, an anti-inflammatory extract from red grapes, to protect lung tissues.

Natasha Turner, ND, is a practising naturopath, author, and natural health expert. Her clinical specialties are hormonal issues, weight management, preventive health, and digestive concerns. clearmedicine.com