

Bears & Health

Bears and Cancer: a major new study cites weight as a major risk factor for a wide range of cancers

More bad news bears. For those of us who are turned on by weight and who feel attractive when we are heavy, the constant barrage of new studies and advisories about the health problems we are more prone to can be a real pooper. How I wish there were more studies about the benefits of bulk – for example, how it can facilitate socialization, and mitigate depression; how much fun and how hot it can be.

As I've observed in previous columns, one of the reasons there is so much bad news on this front now is that the country is in the midst of what's being called an epidemic of fat. Now, I love and am attracted to bears and chubs, consider myself a bear, and probably just like you I often experience a kind of thrill when I see what appears to be so many more bears, not only gay but straight as well (e.g., King of Queens). Clearly, the men who are expanding in waist are likewise expanding in numbers. We are everywhere now, a lot more so than we used to be. And our sex appeal is likewise coming out of the closet (the flirtation with the idea of fat as sexy in King of Queens is like gayness in the old Rock Hudson movies. Now go back and look at the Honeymooners.)

Different factors to this national trend are cited as contributory. I used to think it was another example of gay trendsetting, like when we were the first to wear the ear and nipple rings and studs that are now widely sported by straight men. But I suspect that the biggest factor is the increased use of what are called trans-fats in many foods. They are highly addictive and may stimulate not only those with eat-

ing disorders to eat more than they might ordinarily, but those who've never had such problems before.

All of this is prelude to yet another major study on the health impact of being overweight. It's from the *New England Journal of Medicine* (4/24/03), the world's most prestigious and influential medical journal. The study documents a significantly increased rate of many different types of cancer, and documents an increased risk and risk of death from cancer that rises with increases in weight (body mass index). Among the cancers observed are: esophageal, stomach, colorectal, liver, pancreatic, lung, bladder and lymphatic cancers, leukemias and melanoma.

The study concludes: "Overweight and obesity are associated with the risk of death from all cancers and with death from cancers at many specific sites. From our results, we estimate that 90,000 deaths due to cancer could be prevented each year in the United States if men and women would maintain normal weight. It is unlikely that this goal can be achieved without concerted effort and substantial investment on the part of policymakers, educators, clinicians, employers, and schools to promote physical activity and healthful dietary practices as a cultural norm."

Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow... Which brings us to the issue of increased cancer awareness and screening for middle-aged and older men, of which we bears are many.

Several important tips. **Cancer of the colon** is one of the most common. Every man and woman should have a screening colonoscopy by age 50, and

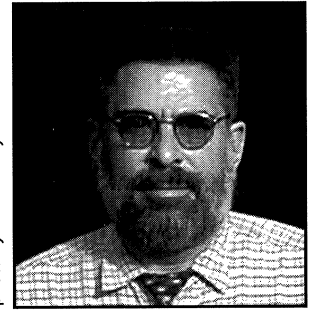


photo by Joel Bradley

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earlier if there is a family history of cancer of the colon. **Malignant melanoma**, one of the most aggressive cancers, usually starts with a mole on the skin. The numbers of new cases of this cancer have skyrocketed in recent years, largely because of the thinning of the ozone layer. And now we are told that being overweight can add to the risk. We bears tend to gather under the sun, which is a lot more dangerous place to be than it used to be. Sunscreen is recommended even for those of us who are not fair skinned and who tend to tan easily and deeply. Especially for those of us who do spend time in the sun, we should be examined periodically by a dermatologist. Any mole that begins to grow or change color should be checked by a dermatologist as soon as possible. **Cancer of the prostate**, another common cancer among middle-aged and older men, has been reviewed in previous Bears and Health columns. By age 50, your prostate should at least have been examined via rectal exam by a physician or other qualified health practitioner.

Bear bytes: Levitra, a new faster-acting version of Viagra is now available. It's also said to have fewer side-effects (blue vision). Future columns will address the pros and cons of cholesterol-lowering drugs, and will revisit "Bearitartics," obesity surgery, the demand for which has outpaced the surgeons and hospitals available to do them.