

"What four cancer specialists do daily to cut their own health risk"

The Australian, August 29, 2026

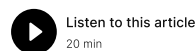
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THE AUSTRALIAN

HEALTH > WELLBEING

What four cancer specialists do daily to cut their own health risk

No supplements, little to no booze and prioritising family are just some of the health tips our top cancer specialists live by.

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Every day in Australia about 465 people are diagnosed with cancer, adding up to almost 170,000 last year, according to Cancer Australia.

It's not just a widespread condition, with more than two in five of those who reach the age of 85 being diagnosed with some form of [cancer](#). It can also still be deadly, with more than 53,000 deaths in Australia from cancer in 2025.

The most common type is [prostate cancer](#), followed by [breast](#), [melanoma](#) and [lung cancer](#). But five-year survival rates have increased from 50 per cent to 70 per cent during the past 30 years, the data shows.

The reason people get cancer is often not clear but there are many links to lifestyle and choices we can all make to reduce our chances of contracting cancer. Here's what the experts in oncology do to mitigate their own risk.

Associate Professor Mei Ling Yap, age 45

Associate Professor Mei Ling Yap is a radiation oncologist and head of the cancer program, the George Institute for Global Health, UNSW Sydney.

What lifestyle changes do you make to lower your cancer risk?

There are lifestyle changes that we know reduce the risk of cancer and I've made these a part of my life – key things include not smoking, regular cancer screening, healthy eating and exercising, limiting alcohol and avoiding excess sun exposure. I'm also up to date with vaccinations (HPV and hepatitis B being the important ones when it comes to cancer).

We know that sun exposure (UV) increases the risk of skin cancer. I wear a hat and sunscreen when the UV is 3+ (I have an app that tells me what time sun protection is needed; particularly useful in summer), wear a rashie when ocean swimming and I am especially careful with ensuring my children have sun protection (given bad sunburn episodes in childhood are associated with increased melanoma risk).

What about diet?

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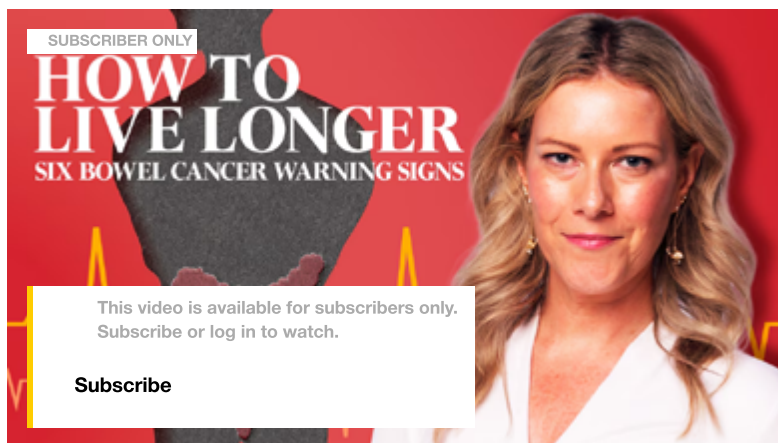
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know they increase [the risk of colorectal cancer](#). Instead, [I eat fish and have meat-free days](#), for health as well as environmental reasons.

I avoid processed food where possible: we buy most of our produce direct from the farmers at our local Sunday markets. Thankfully my partner (ARIA-award winning musician Jeremy Rose) loves cooking, otherwise I'm pretty sure our family would not be eating as well if it were left up to me!



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I add fibre to my diet through fruit and vegetables, as well as psyllium husk to my breakfast in the morning. Dietary fibre reduces the risk of colorectal cancer (and psyllium husk is also good for cholesterol).

[Obesity increases the risk of a number of cancers](#), including breast, endometrial, liver and colorectal cancer. I had a fast metabolism when I was younger but in the last few years I'm more careful. I've recently replaced unhealthy snacks with nuts.

Is any meal more important than the others?

For me, dinner is the most important meal of the day as it's a special time with family. My job is busy, but I very rarely miss dinner with the family and minimise any after-hour meetings that clash. Jeremy is a fabulous cook, so I'm very lucky in that regard.

What exercise do you do?

I do martial arts (taekwondo) training three times a week – I attained my black belt last year – which is great for both cardio fitness and strength training. Along with that I usually do a home strength training routine twice a week and a run or longer bike ride once a week.

Each year a group of us (friends from my junior doctor years) go down the coast for an annual triathlon event. I just do the sprint event, but it motivates me to train in the summer months (ocean swimming, bike riding and running). For ocean swimming I love the Manly-to-Shelly swim; it's a nice distance and there are plenty of beautiful fish and other underwater life along the way.

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On my busy days in hospital I don't get a chance to exercise, but I make sure to take the stairs when I move between the clinic and the wards or the emergency department.

How much sleep do you get? Is this deliberate?

Between seven and eight hours a night – I don't feel fresh otherwise, but additionally the body needs time to rest and repair. We have a no-screen policy (which includes phones, except when I'm on call) in the bedrooms.

Do you take supplements? If so, what?

I don't take any [supplements](#) given there isn't clear data to support the health benefits. I just ensure I get enough vitamins from fresh fruit and vegetables.

How much alcohol do you drink?

In general I don't drink alcohol; only on the odd special occasion will I have a drink. I have an intolerance to alcohol common in East Asian people, which I used to consider embarrassing in my university days. However it's ended up being a really good thing for my health, given [less drinking has lowered my cancer risk substantially](#) too. Around one in 20 diagnoses of cancer is attributed to alcohol use. The lowering of alcohol consumption with the younger generations coming through is a positive change.

Is there anything you do related to the type of cancer you specialise in?

Many patients I see have lung cancer. Refraining from smoking is the best thing one can do to reduce the risk. Recently, Australia started [a lung cancer screening program](#) (biennial low-dose CT scan for people at high risk) and our country is leading the way in that regard. I don't qualify for lung cancer screening as I don't smoke, but I would encourage people who do qualify to speak to their GP about getting screened.



Dr Mei Ling Yap practising taekwondo as part of her fitness regimen.

However, the rate of lung cancer is rising, including in people who have never smoked tobacco, particularly women. Long-term exposure to high levels of air



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pollution is a contributing factor and we all need to play our part in trying to reduce this. Recently I changed my car to an electric vehicle and installed solar panels at home with a battery.

The other exposure is from cooking fumes. The evidence is still emerging, but we keep the house ventilated when cooking and are moving from a gas to electric stove.

Attending regular cancer screening is critical – I ensure I’m up to date with cervical cancer screening, and that’s even easier now that it’s every five years (thanks to the work of Australian researchers) and there’s the option for self-collection. With the recent lowering of the eligible age for bowel cancer screening (the opt-in screening for people aged 45 to 50), I’ve had my first free at-home test and was relieved it was normal. I’ve also reached the age for breast cancer screening and am having my test done later this year.

What about dealing with newer and emerging cancer risks?

I try to reduce the amount of potentially unhealthy chemicals I’m exposed to. [Younger people are being diagnosed with cancer](#) – something I’ve noticed in my clinic over the last decade. The [reasons are not entirely clear](#) but exposure to environmental toxins is being studied.

In the last few years we have replaced non-stick pans with stainless steel versions, changed over to non-toxic cosmetics and skincare products and installed a new drinking-water filter. In the home we have also moved to using less toxic cleaning products.

There is also more research being done on the potential health and cancer risks from microplastics, though it is not yet conclusive. While we wait for more evidence to build, I have erred on the side of caution and tried to reduce the amount of plastic in my life. I use glass food containers and metal keep cups and water bottles. I’m quite staunch about never microwaving any food in a plastic container. As well as this, the less plastics the better for our planet.

Sometimes patients will tell me that a stressful period preceded their diagnosis of cancer or that, looking back, they were burnt out. While the evidence regarding stress as a risk factor for cancer is not yet clear, what we do know is that the immune system is important in fighting off cancer.

So I try to make sure I don’t get too run down, by having some work-life balance. As a radiation oncologist and a researcher juggling multiple roles (as well as a parent of two young kids), it is easier said than done. But I try to make sure to schedule in holidays with the family and minimise working in the evenings.

Professor Sabe Sabesan, age 57

Professor Sabe Sabesan is senior medical oncologist at the Townsville Cancer Centre and president of the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia.

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Professor Sabe Sabesan believes our lifespan is not something we can fully control. Picture: Evan Morgan

What I do to help prevent cancer

People often ask me what I do to reduce my own risk of cancer. My answer is simple: I focus on living well rather than trying to control things I cannot. As an oncologist, I know there are risk factors we can modify and others we cannot. As a Hindu, I also believe that our lifespan is ultimately not something we can fully control.

Rather than trying to influence fate, I concentrate on maintaining the best possible quality of life. Ironically, many of the things that improve quality of life are also associated with better long-term health and may reduce the risk of cancer and other chronic diseases.

For me, wellbeing is the foundation. A healthy mind and a healthy body work together.

Chronic stress can contribute to inflammation and weaken the immune system, both of which may influence the development and progression of disease. Emerging research also suggests that stress may reduce the effectiveness of cancer immunotherapy in some patients. That is why I encourage my patients – and remind myself – to invest in wellbeing every day.

I organise my life around four pillars of wellbeing: physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual.

Physical wellbeing

I run for about 30 minutes every second day. Earlier in life I chased personal best times and finish lines; now I simply run at my own pace and enjoy the experience. I also kayak once a week because it combines exercise with time in nature.

I aim to [keep my weight close to my ideal body weight](#) and stay physically active as part of everyday life.

Emotional wellbeing

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I prioritise spending time with my family, friends and colleagues. Strong relationships are one of the greatest protective factors for both physical and mental health.

Spiritual wellbeing

I meditate every day. Meditation helps me become a better version of myself, remain present, and respond thoughtfully rather than react emotionally to life's challenges.

Intellectual wellbeing

This comes naturally through my work, reading, writing and playing Tamil music. I enjoy learning and creating, and I believe keeping the mind active is just as important as exercising the body.

What about diet, alcohol and smoking?

Diet has always been an important part of my life. Growing up in Sri Lanka, we ate plenty of fresh vegetables, fruit and fish, and I have tried to maintain those habits.

I also changed my relationship with alcohol. My wife and I once enjoyed a glass of wine most evenings but now we rarely drink during the week. I realised I no longer enjoyed the feeling of being tipsy – it felt like I was dulling my mind rather than enriching my life.



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I also avoid cigarette smoke, partly because I have an allergic response to it but also because the health risks are undeniable.

Does a balanced life help?

One belief that has evolved over the years is my view of work. Many people see work as something to escape from or balance against life. I see it differently. My work gives me purpose, challenges me intellectually and connects me with extraordinary people.

Three of my four pillars of wellbeing – emotional, intellectual and, to some extent, spiritual – are strengthened through meaningful work. Rather than seeing work as the enemy of wellbeing, I see it as part of a well-lived life.

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Cancer prevention is not about finding one magic food, supplement or exercise program. It is about consistently making choices that nurture the body, mind and spirit. While none of us can eliminate our risk completely, we can all choose habits that help us live healthier, happier and more meaningful lives.

Dr Sophie Nightingale, age 50

Dr Sophie Nightingale is a consultant surgeon at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, specialising in breast cancer.



Dr Sophie Nightingale enjoys doing a range of exercise.

What lifestyle changes do you make to lower your cancer risk?

At a high level I aim to be active and exercise regularly, including strength training. I eat as healthily as possible and don't smoke or vape. I also like to meditate weekly, walk outside and spend time with my family.

What about diet?

I look to maximise fresh fruit and vegetables in my diet and [minimise processed foods](#) like muesli bars and biscuits. I don't drink soft drink or juice. I eat cured meats only occasionally but ensure I have a fish and a vegetarian meal at least weekly.

Is any meal more important than the others?

I always have breakfast and aim to not eat dinner too late. And I try to plan meals in advance, otherwise I'm more likely to resort to pre-packaged foods or takeaways.

What exercise do you do?

I find doing a variety of exercises makes it easier to commit to doing lots. My regime is Pilates weekly, weight training weekly, virtual cycling three to four times per week, and playing community sport (hockey) weekly.

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Strength or resistance training is very important, especially for [women with higher rates of osteoporosis](#). Good strength training can increase bone density.



Strength training is important, particularly for women with higher rates of osteoporosis. Picture: iStock

How much sleep do you get? Is this deliberate?

I aim to be winding down at 9.30pm and in bed about 10, occasionally later but always before 11.30pm. Sleep is important.

Do you take supplements? If so, what?

I don't take supplements.

How much alcohol do you drink?

Approximately three to four drinks per week. We know [alcohol is a carcinogen](#), but I do enjoy a glass of red wine.

Is there anything you do related to the type of cancer you specialise in?

[Breast cancer is so common](#); one in seven women will develop it in Australia, the highest rates in the world. All these lifestyle changes won't mean that you won't get cancer, but if you are fit and healthy then you will do better if you have a breast cancer diagnosis.

Lifestyle factors are very important. I ask every patient about smoking/vaping, alcohol and exercise. Unfortunately so many women do not exercise enough and many only do walking, which is not enough.

Professor Haitham Tuffaha, age 49

Professor Haitham Tuffaha is a professorial research fellow at the Centre for the Business and Economics of Health, University of Queensland. He is a specialist in

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the health and economic impact of interventions for cancer prevention, early detection, management and survivorship.



Professor Haitham Tuffaha says walking is realistic and accessible for many people.

What lifestyle changes do you make to lower your cancer risk?

I try to follow the lifestyle recommendations supported by the strongest scientific evidence. For me, that means not smoking, not drinking alcohol, maintaining a healthy weight, being physically active, eating well and protecting myself from excessive sun exposure. These choices matter because many cancers are linked to factors that can be changed. At least one in three cancer cases could be prevented through healthier lifestyles and other preventive measures.

I try to build healthy habits into my normal routine rather than treating them as occasional goals. Having young children makes life busy and sometimes unpredictable, so I focus on consistency rather than perfection. Small, healthy choices made regularly over time are likely to be more beneficial than short periods of intense effort that are difficult to maintain.

What about diet?

I generally follow a Mediterranean-style eating pattern. This means eating plenty of vegetables, fruit, wholegrains, legumes and nuts, and using healthy fats such as olive oil. This type of diet is rich in fibre and nutrients and is consistent with international cancer-prevention recommendations.

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Professor Tuffaha says a Mediterranean diet is recommended for cancer prevention. Picture: Getty Images

I try to include vegetables in most meals and choose wholegrain foods where possible. I also limit processed meat, such as bacon and sausages, because there is convincing evidence that processed meat increases the risk of bowel cancer.

I do not believe that cancer prevention requires a restrictive or “perfect” diet. The evidence suggests that the overall pattern of what we eat over time matters more than any individual food.

Is any meal more important than the others?

I do not consider one meal more important than another. Instead, I focus on eating balanced meals throughout the day that provide a good mix of nutrients and help me maintain my energy.

Eating regularly also makes me less likely to reach for unhealthy snacks or convenience foods when I become busy. What matters most is the overall quality of a person’s diet over months and years, rather than the timing or content of a single meal.

What exercise do you do?

I aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity each week, in line with clinical guideline recommendations. Most of this comes from brisk walking because it is easy to fit into a busy schedule and does not require special equipment.

I also try to move regularly during the day and avoid sitting for long periods. Regular physical activity helps with weight management and has been linked to a lower risk of cancer. It also benefits heart health, mental wellbeing and sleep.

What I like about walking is that it is realistic and accessible for many people. Cancer prevention does not necessarily require a gym membership or an intensive exercise program. Activities such as walking, gardening, cycling or active play with kids can all contribute.

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Walking outside combines health and wellbeing benefits, all the experts say. Picture: Getty Images

How much sleep do you get? Is this deliberate?

I aim for around seven hours of [good-quality sleep each night](#). Achieving that consistently can be challenging with children and work commitments, but I make a deliberate effort to prioritise it. The direct relationship between sleep and cancer risk is still being studied, so I would not claim that getting seven hours of sleep prevents cancer. However, insufficient or poor-quality sleep can affect mental health and our ability to remain active and make healthy choices.

Do you take supplements? If so, what?

I do not routinely take supplements. For most people without a diagnosed deficiency or particular medical need, it is preferable to obtain nutrients from a balanced and varied diet. Supplements can, of course, be important when recommended by a doctor or dietitian, for example to treat a deficiency or meet a specific health need. In my case, I focus on obtaining nutrients through food rather than relying on tablets or powders.

How much alcohol do you drink?

I do not drink alcohol. The [evidence linking alcohol with cancer](#) is strong: alcohol is a known cause of at least seven types of cancer, including cancers of the bowel, liver, and head and neck cancer. The risk generally rises as the amount consumed increases, but there is no completely risk-free level of alcohol consumption in relation to cancer. This does not mean that everyone who drinks will develop cancer; it means that, on average, drinking increases a person's risk.

Is there anything you do related to the type of cancer you specialise in?

My work spans cancer control and access to effective cancer treatments rather than focusing exclusively on one cancer type. A major part of my work is examining how we can use evidence and healthcare resources wisely so that patients can gain timely and equitable access to effective prevention, diagnosis and treatment.



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Personally, [I participate in the cancer-screening programs recommended for my age](#) and risk profile and encourage others to do the same. Screening can identify certain cancers, or changes that may lead to cancer, before symptoms appear. This can allow treatment to begin earlier and, in some cases, prevent cancer from developing.

I also follow SunSmart practices by using sunscreen, wearing protective clothing and a hat, and seeking shade when spending time outdoors. Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world, so sun protection is particularly important.

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