

Study Reaches Five Year Milestone

In February 2001, the first 2,500 questionnaires for *The Tomorrow Project* were mailed to participants across Alberta. Now, five years later, over 18,000 Albertans have volunteered for the project and have returned close to 60,000 questionnaires.

What lessons have we learned in the past 5 years?

We have learned that people in *The Tomorrow Project* have a personal stake in the study. Many of you have told us that you joined the study because you have friends, relatives or neighbours who have battled the disease. Several of you dedicated your participation to specific people in your lives.

We have also learned that participants in the study are amazingly generous in telling us about their health and lifestyles. Very few of the questions on the surveys go unanswered and, even when we do have to call about missing information, you are invariably happy to fill us in.

On-line questionnaires were not as popular as we predicted. In response to the many people who asked if a web-based version of the questionnaires was available, we offered this option to over 6,500 participants in Survey 2004. Much to our surprise, very few took us up on the offer – only 368 questionnaires (just over 5% of responses) were completed over the Internet.

While the participants who returned the “e-form” loved the experience, many others told us they preferred to take the paper form with them to work on in their spare moments, or while they watched TV.

Once you have joined the study, you are committed! The response rate to Survey 2004 is above 92% among those who answered all three questionnaires at ‘baseline’. Thank you to all of you who have taken time over the past five years to be a participant of *The Tomorrow Project*.

Meet Liz McGregor, Co-Investigator with *The Tomorrow Project*

Dr. Liz McGregor, a co-investigator with *The Tomorrow Project*, has a keen interest in the potential that screening tests play in the field of cancer control.

Liz was born and raised in Ontario but later moved to Alberta where she completed her Masters and PhD degrees in Epidemiology at the University of Calgary. She has been with the Alberta Cancer Board for over 15 years, exploring a variety of topics related to the potential of screening tests in cancer prevention.

Liz’s current research interests include learning more about people’s awareness of and attitudes to the use of colorectal cancer screening tests such as “blood stool tests” and colonoscopy. Her work will be very useful in the planning process for a provincial colorectal screening program.



Dr. Elizabeth McGregor

Liz is also the busy mother of two daughters and can often be found at synchronized swim meets.

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A research initiative of the Alberta Cancer Board



Tomorrow's News

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The Tomorrow Project® — Albertans Studying the Connection Between Lifestyle and Cancer

Who Funds *The Tomorrow Project*?

We are often asked who funds *The Tomorrow Project*. The study, currently involving over 18,000 Albertans, is a research initiative of the Alberta Cancer Board, the provincial health authority that operates cancer facilities and programs across Alberta.

The mission of the Alberta Cancer Board is to reduce the burden of cancer through prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment, palliation, education and research. This comprehensive orientation makes the Alberta Cancer Board a unique agency in Canada.

Specifically, you can find the Alberta Cancer Board at work in:

Cancer facilities, where first class care is provided and research conducted:

- Cross Cancer Institute in Edmonton
- Tom Baker Cancer Centre in Calgary

Associate Cancer Centres, where Albertans can receive care close to home:

- Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Red Deer and Medicine Hat

Community Cancer Centres operated in conjunction with Health Regions:

- Canmore, High River, Drayton Valley, Drumheller, Camrose, Lloydminster, Hinton, Barrhead, Bonnyville, Peace River, Fort McMurray

Cancer prevention, screening and surveillance initiatives:

- Cancer prevention outreach programs are

operated in cooperation with Health Regions across the province. Campaigns to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables, to increase the use of sun protection strategies and to reduce the use of tobacco products have all recently been launched in the province.

- Screen Test: A breast cancer screening program is operated from sites in Calgary and Edmonton as well as from mobile mammography vans that travel throughout the province.
- Alberta Cervical Cancer Screening Program: A new program to reduce the mortality rates from cervical cancer will be fully implemented in 2006.
- Alberta Cancer Registry: A computerized database tracks all cancer cases in the province. The Registry is an invaluable source of information for monitoring cancer trends and for planning appropriate cancer control strategies.
- Population health research: A range of epidemiologic research is conducted into population-based trends in cancer causes, early detection and prevention.

How does *The Tomorrow Project* fit this mandate? Cancer research is the foundation upon which high quality programs in cancer treatment, prevention and education continue to be built. *The Tomorrow Project* is an innovative aspect of this research program that is creating a research resource and legacy for cancer researchers over the next decades.

Reducing the Risk of Cancer and Chronic Disease



Now that *The Tomorrow Project* has processed questionnaires from the first 15,000 participants, it seems like a good time to look at some of the preliminary findings.

As you will recall, the aim of the project is to determine how certain behaviours or characteristics might influence cancer risk in the Alberta population. Because the study is still relatively new, we can't start to do that part of our work right away. However, we thought you might find it interesting to know how cohort participants are doing with respect to some of the lifestyle factors that are currently thought to influence risks of developing cancer, or other chronic conditions like heart disease or stroke.

Many organizations have produced guidelines that are designed to help people reduce their risks of developing diseases such as cancer or heart disease. Because these guidelines often differ in terms of the fine detail, it can sometimes be difficult to figure out exactly what the experts think we should be doing to improve our chances of remaining healthy. On reviewing many of these guidelines, we identified five key messages:

(1) Don't use tobacco products.

The good news is that approximately 80% of people in the cohort currently don't use any type of tobacco product. Just about half of the non-smokers said they used to smoke daily, but have now stopped.



(2) If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.

Approximately 80% of study participants report that they comply with Health Canada's guidelines for alcohol consumption by consuming no more than one alcoholic drink per day, on average. Fifteen percent of people said that they didn't consume any alcohol at all in the past year.

(3) Maintain a healthy body weight.

We assessed this by looking at body mass index (BMI). Some experts argue that this is not the best way of assessing weight status, but it is still what most of the guidelines are based on. Adults with a BMI of between 18.5 and 24.9 are considered to have a healthy body weight. Just about one third of people in the cohort fell into this category. A BMI of 25 or more (overweight) is considered to increase risk of developing some cancers and other chronic diseases. Currently, the proportion of overweight people in the cohort is about 65%. In fact, approximately 26% of people reported having a BMI that placed them in the obese category (BMI of 30 or more).

(4) If possible, be physically active.

There are many different guidelines for physical activity. Guidelines for reducing risk of cardiovascular disease suggest that people should try to do three 20 minute sessions per week of vigorous activity. For the purposes of this work, we chose to look at length of time that people said they spent doing vigorous activities like hiking, dancing or running. Only one third of people within the cohort reported that they did an hour of vigorous activity during a typical week.

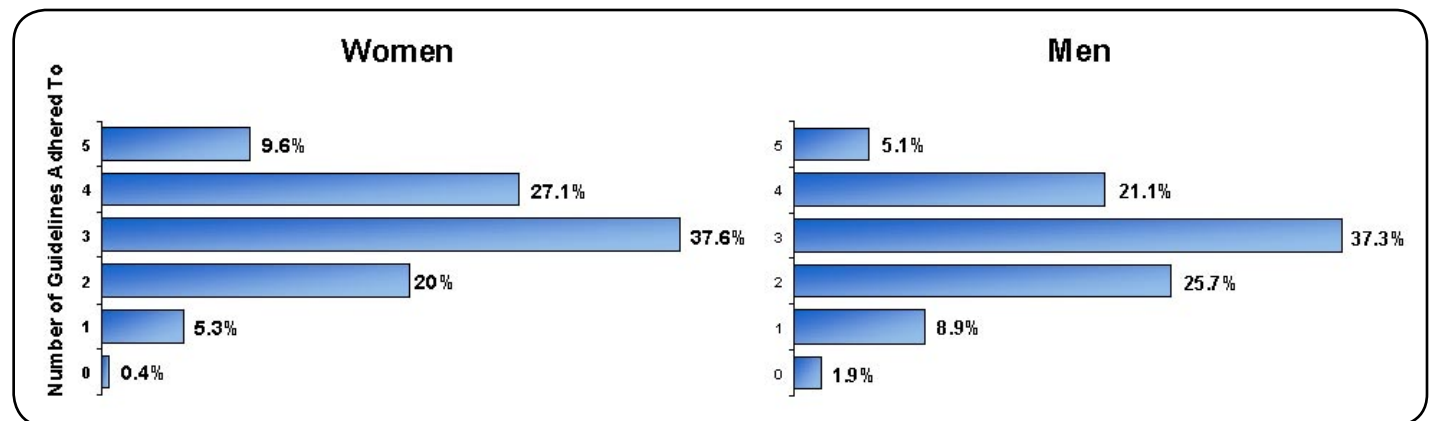


(5) Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

Just over two thirds of study participants have told us that they meet this target.

So, does anyone comply with all five of these guidelines? Only about 8% of people told us that they did, while at the other end of the scale, approximately 1% of people didn't meet any of the guidelines. Women were more likely than men to say that they met all of the guidelines.

Percentage of Tomorrow Project Participants Who Meet Healthy Lifestyle Guidelines



Many modifiable lifestyle behaviours can significantly impact cancer risk in the population. Therefore, it looks like more work needs to be done to help people adopt healthier behaviours, in the hope that we can reduce cancer risk in the future.

Further detailed analysis of this information will be very valuable for helping to develop and enhance strategies for prevention of cancer and other chronic diseases in Alberta, and beyond.

Want to know more?

Alberta Cancer Board

www.cancerboard.ab.ca/cancer/simplyhealthy/diet_cancer.html

American Cancer Society

www.cancer.org/downloads/PRO/PhysActivity.pdf

www.cancer.org/downloads/PRO/alcohol.pdf

Health Canada: Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/fg_rainbow-arc_en_ciel_ga_e.html

National Cancer Institute

www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Tobacco/cancer