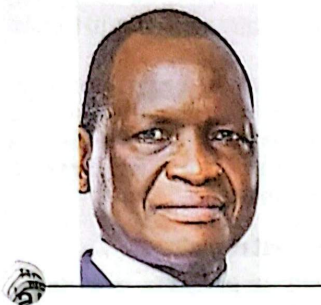




UCI

Dr Jackson Orem

Cancer is often perceived as a disease that strikes without warning. However, growing evidence shows that many cancers are closely linked to everyday lifestyle choices. In Uganda, lifestyle-related risk factors are increasingly contributing to the burden of disease, particularly cancers of the esophagus and liver.

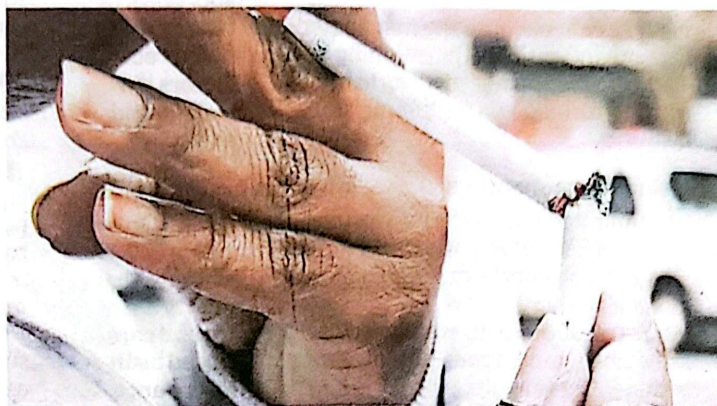
At the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), experts emphasise that adopting healthier habits can significantly reduce the risk of developing cancer while improving overall well-being.

Tobacco and alcohol: A dangerous combination

Among the most critical lifestyle risk factors are tobacco use and harmful alcohol consumption. Tobacco, whether smoked or used in smokeless forms, contains numerous cancer-causing chemicals that damage body cells. This damage can lead to cancers of the esophagus, lung, throat, and mouth. In Uganda, tobacco use remains a concern, especially among men and young people who are often influenced by peer pressure and targeted advertising.

Esophageal cancer, one of the most common cancers treated at UCI, has

Everyday habits quietly increasing your cancer risk



been strongly linked to both tobacco and alcohol use. When combined, these two factors significantly increase the risk. Alcohol irritates the lining of the esophagus and amplifies the harmful effects of tobacco, creating a compounded threat. Reducing or completely avoiding tobacco, alongside limiting alcohol intake, is therefore critical in cancer prevention.

Similarly, liver cancer is closely associated with excessive alcohol consumption. Prolonged alcohol use can lead to liver damage, including cirrhosis, which greatly increases cancer risk. In Uganda, where liver disease is also driven by infections such as hepatitis B and C, alcohol further worsens the situation. Individuals are encouraged to adopt responsible drinking habits, or abstain altogether, to protect their liver health.

Choices that can save lives

Beyond tobacco and alcohol, diet and physical activity play a vital role

in cancer prevention. Diets low in fruits and vegetables but high in processed and unhealthy foods can increase cancer risk. In contrast, fruits and vegetables are rich in vitamins, minerals, fibre, and antioxidants that protect the body against cell damage, strengthen the immune system, and reduce inflammation.

UCI encourages Ugandans to incorporate a variety of locally available foods into their daily meals. Nutritious options include mangoes, oranges, bananas, and leafy greens such as sukuma wiki and doodo, alongside tomatoes and carrots. A balanced diet should also include whole grains, legumes, and adequate water intake, while limiting processed foods, excess salt, and unhealthy fats.

Physical activity is another key pillar of cancer prevention. Regular exercise helps maintain a healthy weight, boosts immune function, and reduces inflammation. It has been shown to lower the risk of sev-

eral cancers, including breast, colorectal, and endometrial cancers.

In the Ugandan context, everyday activities such as walking, cycling, farming, and household chores can significantly contribute to physical fitness.

Maintaining a healthy weight is particularly important, as overweight and obesity are linked to an increased risk of several cancers. Rapid urbanisation, and changing lifestyles have led to more sedentary habits and increased consumption of unhealthy foods, contributing to rising obesity rates in Uganda. Promoting active living and healthy eating is essential in reversing this trend.

It is also important to recognise that lifestyle choices are shaped by social and environmental factors. Limited access to healthy foods, lack of safe spaces for exercise, and cultural attitudes toward alcohol consumption can all influence behaviour. Addressing these challenges requires collective action from communities, policymakers, and health institutions to create environments that support healthier living.

Public awareness remains central to this effort. Many people are still unaware of the link between lifestyle and cancer risk or underestimate the long-term impact of daily habits. Through community outreach, media campaigns, and health education programmes, UCI continues to raise awareness and empower individuals to make informed choices.

Cancer prevention is not only a medical responsibility; it is a personal and societal one. Small, consistent changes such as quitting tobacco, reducing alcohol intake, eating a balanced diet, and staying physically active can have a profound impact on health outcomes.

The writer is the executive director, Uganda Cancer Institute