

American
Institute for
Cancer
Research®

2019 AICR Cancer Risk Awareness Survey



Introduction

In 2001, the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) commissioned its first Cancer Risk Awareness Survey to gauge Americans' awareness of various lifestyle-related cancer risk factors. This is the ninth edition of the survey.

The Cancer Risk Awareness Survey provides important insights into how Americans view cancer risk factors that are backed by scientific evidence and factors that lack a scientific consensus but are believed to be linked to cancer by the general public.

AICR recognizes there are many reasons for low awareness of certain cancer risk factors. We offer these survey findings as a tool to help individuals and organizations encourage healthy lifestyle changes based on our comprehensive research to reduce cancer risk among Americans.

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Established Cancer Risk Factors

Obesity	Increases risk of colorectal, breast (post-menopausal), ovarian, esophageal, endometrial, kidney, pancreatic, gallbladder, stomach, liver, mouth/pharynx/larynx and advanced prostate cancers.
Insufficient physical activity	Increases risk of colorectal, breast (pre- and post-menopausal) and endometrial cancers.
Alcohol	Increases risk of colorectal, breast (pre- and post-menopausal), mouth/pharynx/larynx, liver, esophageal and stomach cancers.
Sugar	Indirectly linked to increased cancer risk, as consuming high-sugar foods can lead to excess weight gain and body fat.
Diets low in fruits and vegetables	Increases risk of colorectal cancer and mouth/pharynx/larynx cancer.
Diets low in fiber	Increases risk of colorectal cancer.
Diets high in red meat	Increases risk of colorectal cancer.
Cured (processed) meats	Increases risk of colorectal cancer.

Key Findings

Fewer than half of Americans recognize that alcohol, diets high in red meat, diets low in vegetables, fruits, and fiber and insufficient physical activity all have a clear link to cancer development.

While this statistic is alarmingly low, awareness of other established cancer risk factors like obesity and processed meat is above 50% among Americans for the first time since AICR began conducting the Cancer Risk Awareness Survey in 2001.

Other significant findings from the 2019 survey:



AICR added diets low in fiber as a new lifestyle-related cancer risk factor to the 2019 survey. The survey revealed that only 38% of Americans are aware of the link between diets low in fiber and cancer risk, while there is strong evidence that fiber lowers risk for colorectal cancer.



Among Americans, awareness of the link between cancer and diets high in red meat has risen above 39% (to 43%) for the first time ever since AICR launched the Cancer Risk Awareness Survey in 2001.



Less than half of Americans understand the role diet plays in reducing cancer risk. Awareness levels are low for diets high in fat (46%) and diets low in vegetables and fruits (42%) increasing cancer risk.



Only 4 in 10 Americans (39%) are aware that insufficient physical activity increases cancer risk. With new technology encouraging sedentary behavior, this is concerning because there is strong evidence that being physically active decreases the risk of colon, breast (pre- and post-menopausal) and endometrial cancers.



The majority of Americans correctly identify tobacco (89%) and excessive exposure to sunlight (82%) as cancer risks.

Survey Results

AICR Cancer Risk Awareness Survey

Percentage who answered “Yes”

RANKING	2019	CHANGE FROM 2017	2017
Radiation	91%	5% increase	86%
Tobacco	89%	4% decrease	93%
Inherited predisposition/cancer genes	84%	3% decrease	87%
Industrial pollution	84%	0	84%
Excessive exposure to sunlight	82%	2% decrease	84%
Asbestos	81%	1% increase	80%
Pesticide residue on produce	80%	6% increase	74%
Nuclear power	71%	10% increase	61%
Food additives	64%	4% increase	60%
Radon	63%	5% increase	58%
Genetically modified foods	60%	6% increase	54%
Hormones in beef	59%	7% increase	52%
Artificial sweeteners	58%	3% increase	55%
Stress	54%	2% decrease	56%

RANKING	2019	CHANGE FROM 2017	2017
Overweight/obesity	53%	3% increase	50%
Cured (processed) meats	53%	13% increase	40%
Viruses and bacteria	53%	3% increase	50%
Trans-fat	48%	7% increase	41%
Diets high in fat	46%	2% increase	44%
Alcohol	45%	6% increase	39%
Diets high in red meat	43%	8% increase	35%
Diets low in vegetables and fruits	42%	3% decrease	45%
Cell phones	39%	2% increase	37%
Insufficient physical activity	39%	0	39%
Plastic bottles	39%	1% increase	38%
Diets low in fiber	38%	N/A	N/A
Sugar	30%	2% increase	28%
Grilling meat	26%	3% increase	23%
Coffee	10%	0	10%

Methodology

The AICR Cancer Risk Awareness Survey has been conducted periodically since 2001. A random sample of Americans ages 18 and older are called on behalf of AICR by SSRS using the SSRS Omnibus Survey.

The 2019 survey included 1,009 interviews, of which 704 interviews were completed with respondents on their cell phones and 35 were conducted in Spanish. Survey data was collected between September 24–29, 2019, with a margin of error of +/- 3%.

The SSRS Omnibus sample is designed to represent the adult U.S. population (including Hawaii and Alaska). The SSRS Omnibus uses a fully replicated, single-stage, random-digit-dialing sample of landline telephone households, and randomly generated cell phone numbers.

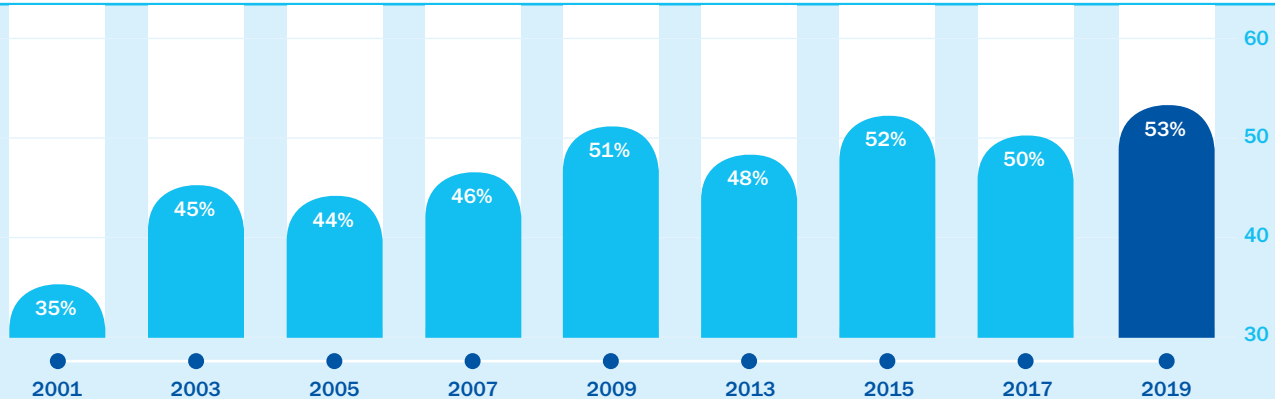
Respondents were asked, “Do you believe [risk factor] has a significant effect on whether or not the average person develops cancer?” Respondents were given the option to answer “yes,” “no,” “don’t know” or “refused.” The 29 risk factors were randomly ordered and read to respondents one at a time.

Raw data tables of the 2019 survey, including breakdowns by sex, age, household income, region, education, race, political affiliation and metro status, and a full methodology report are available upon request by contacting communications@aicr.org.

Awareness Trends for Cancer Risks Related to Diet, Physical Activity and Weight



Overweight/Obesity

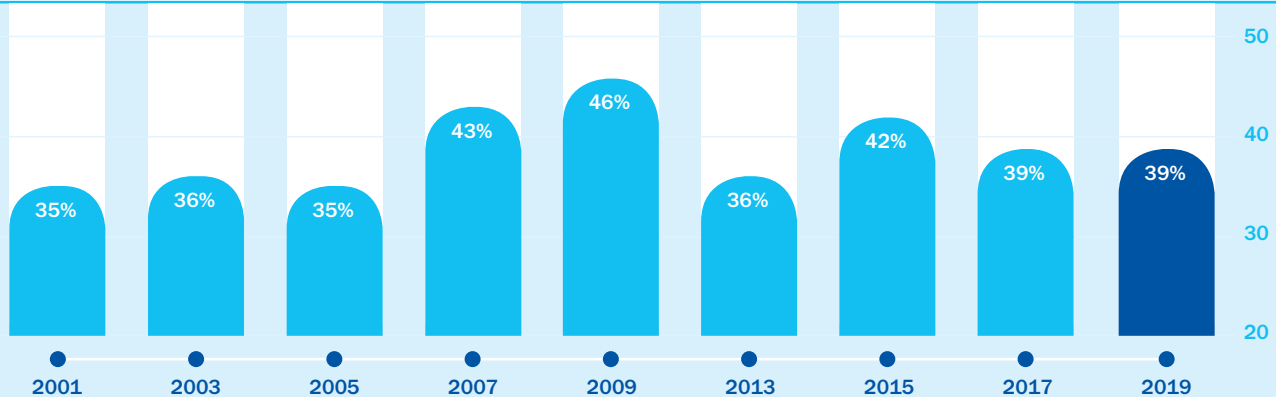


Awareness of the link between obesity and cancer risk has reached its highest point in the history of the AICR Cancer Risk Awareness Survey, with 53% of survey respondents answering “Yes” to “Do you believe obesity and overweight has a significant effect on whether or not the average person develops cancer?”

It is encouraging that Americans are becoming more aware of the effects of overweight and obesity, but awareness levels need to be higher. Aside from not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight throughout life is the single most important way to protect against cancer. Our research has found strong evidence that obesity increases the risk for 12 types of cancers.



Insufficient Physical Activity

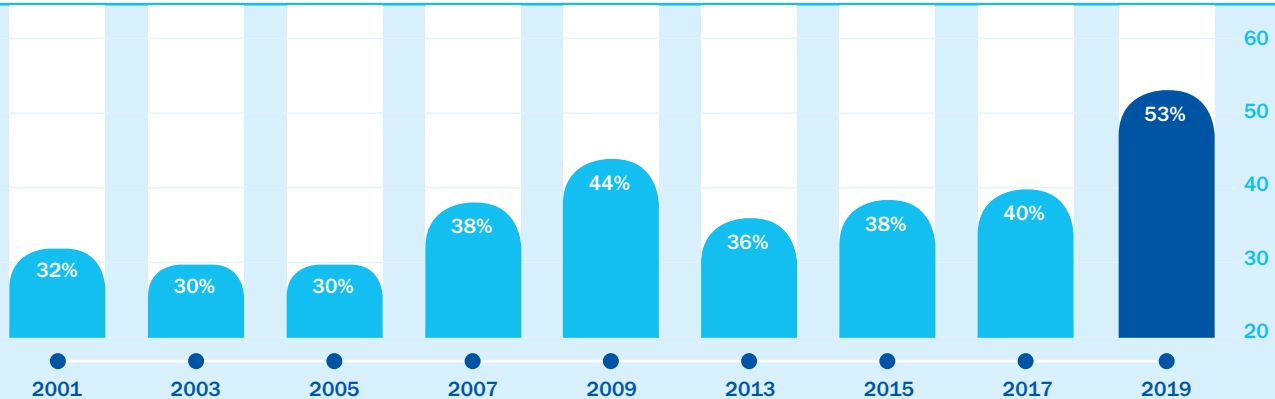


Awareness that insufficient physical activity plays a role in increasing cancer risk has remained low, with awareness levels remaining unchanged since 2017.

Being physically active has both a direct and indirect link to protecting against cancer. Physical activity helps regulate the body's hormone levels, which helps reduce cancer risk as some hormones can increase risk if their levels get too high. Physical activity also helps prevent the buildup of excess body fat and body fat itself is linked to 12 types of cancers.



Cured (Processed) Meats

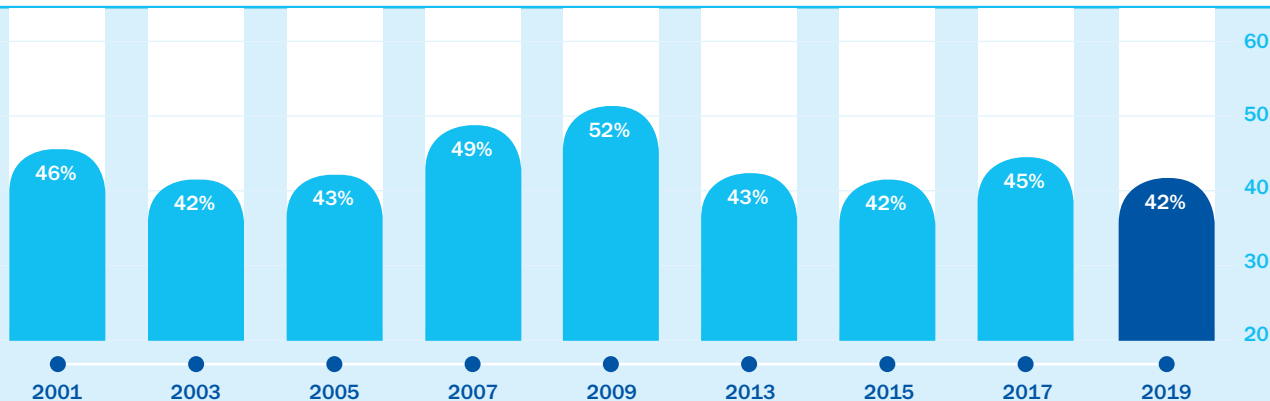


Awareness of the link between cured meats and cancer risk has increased by 13% since AICR last conducted the Cancer Risk Awareness Survey in 2017.

Cured meats, also called processed meats, includes bacon, ham, hot dogs and cold cuts. Even small amounts of processed meat consumed regularly increases risk for colorectal cancer. AICR is excited to see that messages explaining the link between cured meats and cancer risk are beginning to resonate with consumers, but this number still needs to be much higher. AICR recommends avoiding these foods in general and saving them only for special occasions.



Diets Low in Vegetables and Fruits

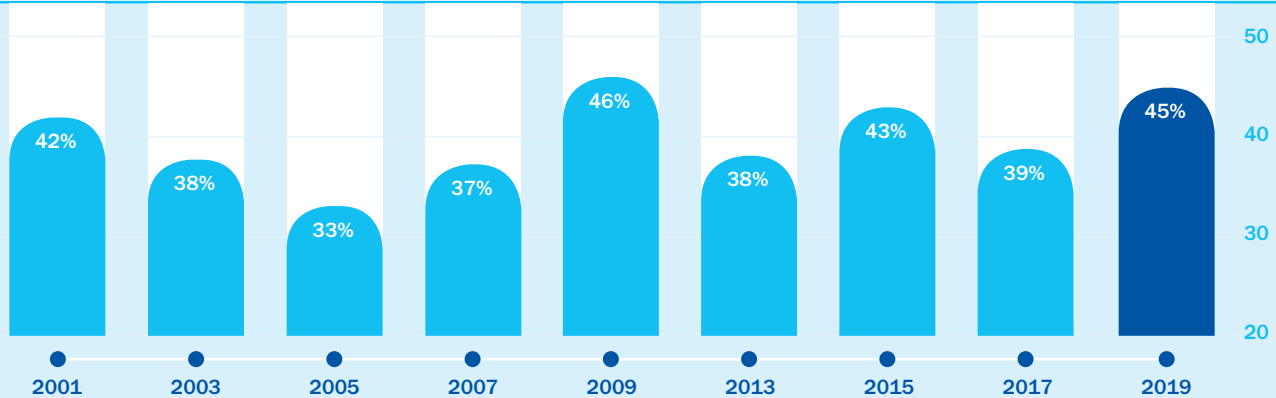


Awareness of the link between diets low in vegetables and fruits and increased cancer risk remains low.

There is clear evidence that diets high in plant-based foods decreases the risk for several cancers. Are Americans not hearing this health message or are they choosing to ignore it? AICR believes that the mixed messaging on nutrition that exists online and on social media is confusing consumers and science-based public health advice is not being highlighted as a reputable source.



Alcohol

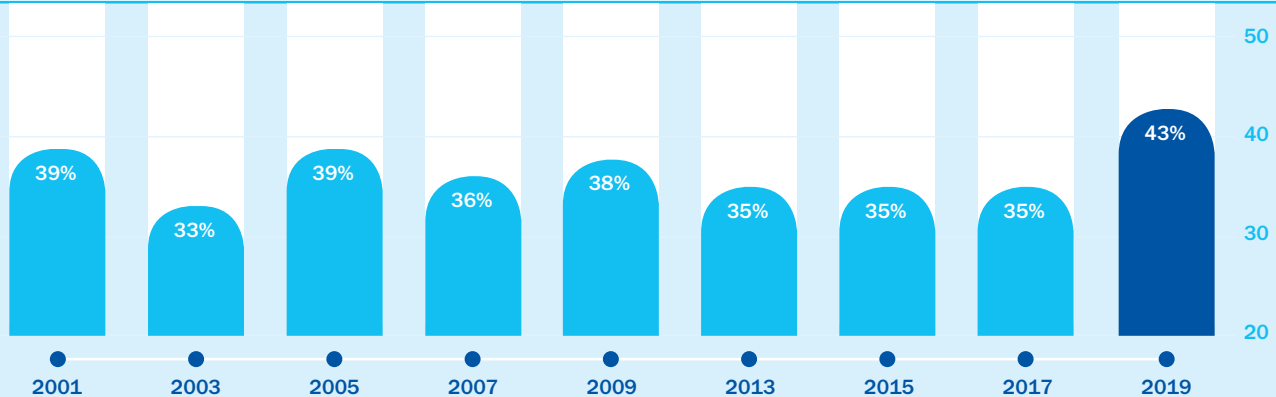


Awareness of the link between alcohol and increased cancer risk has risen 6% since AICR last conducted the Cancer Risk Awareness Survey in 2017. While less than half of survey respondents recognize that alcohol links to cancer, it is still encouraging to see this increase in awareness.

Research shows that all alcohol – beer, liquor and wine – is a clear and convincing cause of several cancers, including breast and liver cancers, so why is awareness low? AICR believes messages about the healthy heart benefits of modest alcohol intake are overshadowing the messages about alcohol and cancer risk.



Diets High in Red Meat

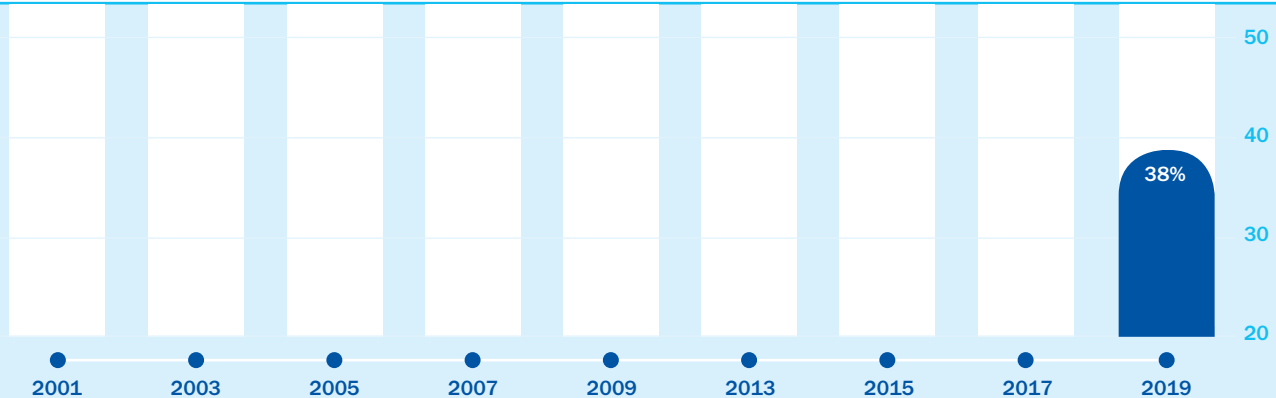


Awareness of the link between diets high in red meat and increased cancer risk has risen for the first time since 2013 and is above 40% for the first time in survey history.

Red meat (beef, pork and lamb) made many news headlines in 2019, as conflicting messages about its impact on health continued to confuse consumers. However, it seems that consumers are beginning to listen to science-based messages explaining the negative health effects of eating red meat. At high levels of red meat consumption, risk for colorectal cancer increases significantly. Thus, AICR recommends limiting red meat consumption to no more than 12–18 ounces (cooked) per week.



Diets Low in Fiber

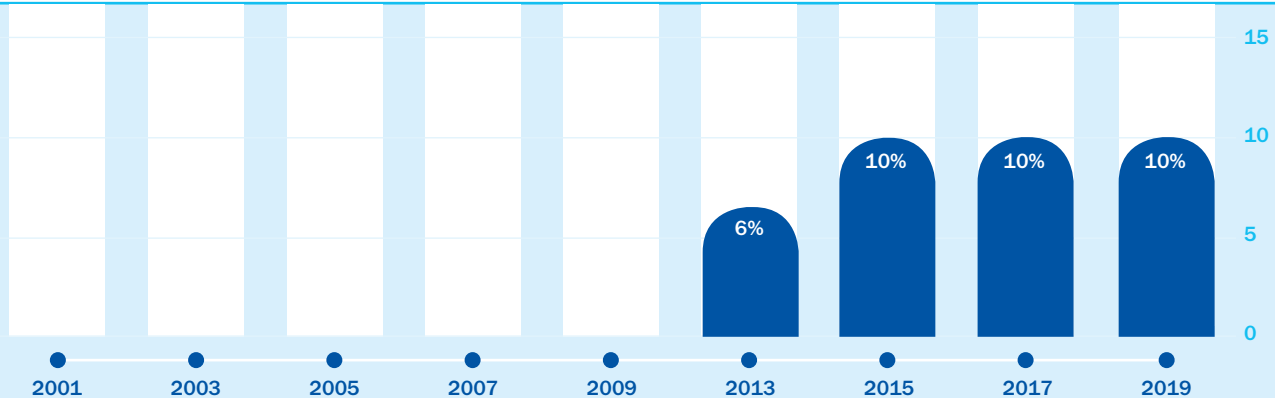


For the first time in survey history, AICR asked respondents if they believed diets low in fiber had a significant effect on whether or not the average person develops cancer. The results were alarming, as only 38% of respondents answered “Yes.”

Plant foods rich in dietary fiber protect against cancer, specifically colorectal cancer – the third most common cancer in the U.S. AICR recommends consuming at least 30 grams of fiber each day and starting slowly when introducing fiber into your diet. Messaging around the importance of fiber in reducing cancer risk needs to be more clearly and effectively communicated to Americans.



Coffee



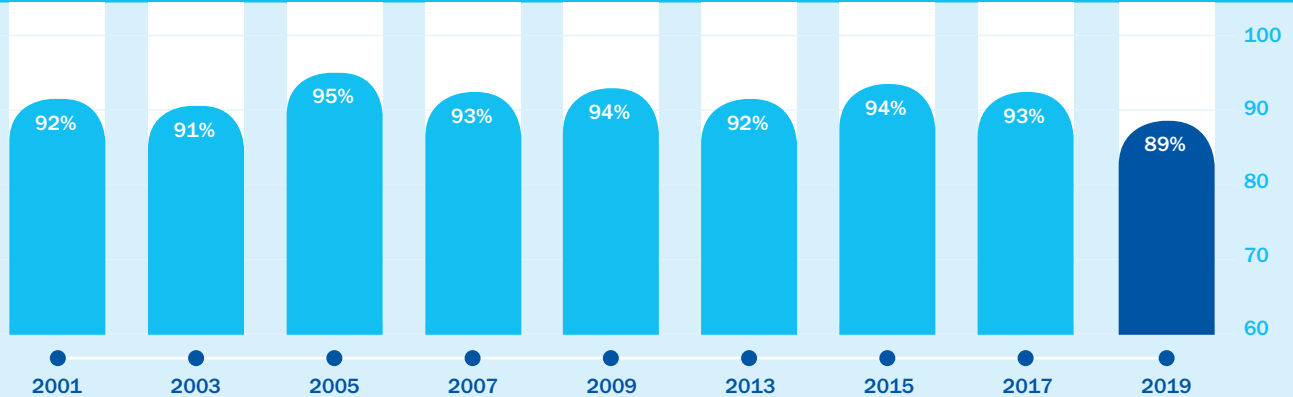
The belief that coffee is linked to increased cancer risk has remained low. Even though there is mixed messaging promoted in the news and on social media about coffee and cancer risk, it is encouraging to know that most Americans understand coffee does not increase cancer risk.

AICR/WCRF weighed the strength of the evidence linking coffee to risk of cancer development and concluded there is strong, probable evidence that coffee lowers risk of endometrial cancer and liver cancer. Coffee contains a variety of beneficial phytochemicals, but recommendations have not been made about coffee as more research needs to be done.

Awareness Trends for Other Notable Cancer Risks



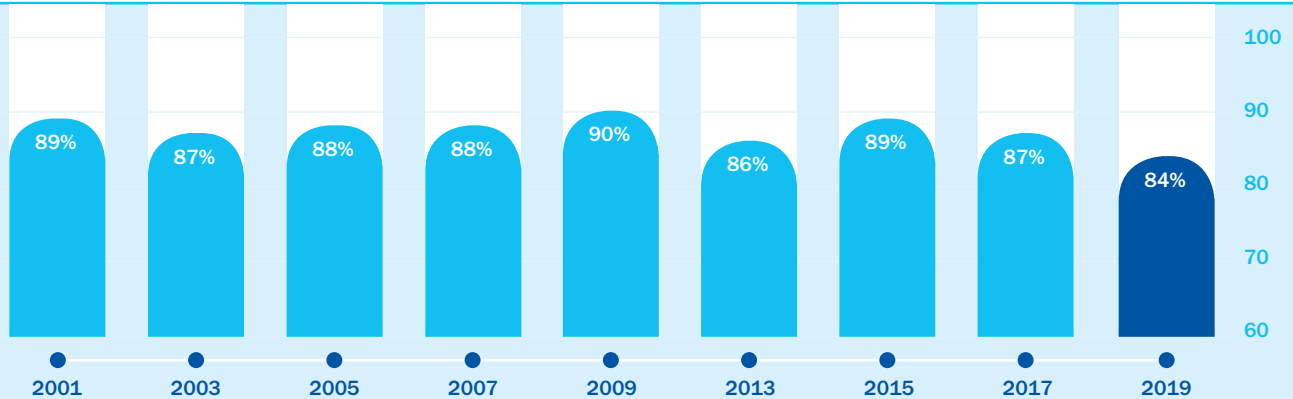
Tobacco



While awareness levels of the dangers of tobacco have slightly decreased since 2001, it is still encouraging to know health messages about this clear and convincing risk for cancer is understood by most Americans.



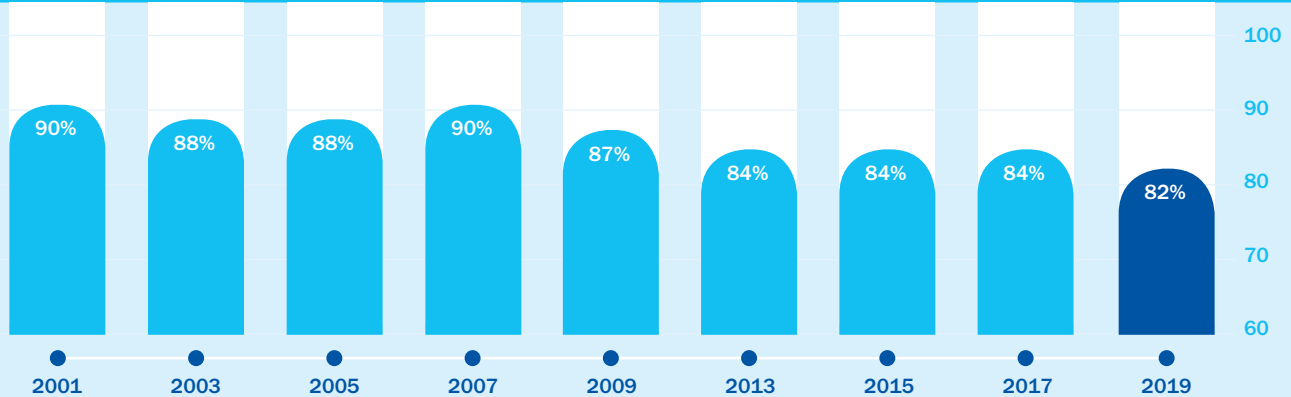
Inherited Predisposition/Cancer Genes



Inherited predisposition and cancer genes are still believed to be one of the top five cancer risk factors. While it is true that individuals born with BRCA1, APC or other “cancer genes” are at an increased risk for cancer, the vast majority of cancers that occur are contracted by individuals who do not carry these genes.



Excessive Exposure to Sunlight



Awareness of the link between excessive exposure to the sun and increased cancer risk has remained high, with a slight decrease in 2019. Sun exposure increases risk for skin cancer – the most common form of the disease – so it is important that awareness levels remain high.

