

# The AICR 2013 Cancer Risk Awareness Survey Report

 AMERICAN INSTITUTE *for*  
**CANCER RESEARCH**®



## INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) commissioned a survey to gauge public awareness of various lifestyle-related cancer risk factors.

We wanted to determine how well the American public was able to separate clearly established cancer risks, such as those highlighted in our comprehensive expert reports and Continuous Update Project (CUP) from factors about which no such scientific consensus exists, but which many in the public believe cause cancer.



## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Americans generally remain more prone to blame cancer on factors they do not control than they are to recognize the steps they can take to help protect themselves. This has held true in every AICR Cancer Risk Awareness Survey conducted since 2001.

- In 2013, awareness of all six of the well-established lifestyle-related risk factors highlighted in AICR's expert reports and CUP dropped.
- Prior to the 2013 survey, these six factors – **alcohol, diets high in red meat, lack of vegetables and fruits, obesity, cured meats and inactivity** – had been trending upward. Today, however, over half of respondents fail to correctly identify any of these factors as cancer risks.
- Awareness that **being inactive** raises risk experienced the most alarming drop in the survey, from 46 percent to 36 percent.
- But Americans *have* heard health messages about cancer's link to certain long-established factors. As they have since the survey began, an overwhelming majority of Americans correctly identify **tobacco** (92 percent) and **excessive sun exposure** (84 percent) as cancer risks.

The **six well-established cancer risk factors from our expert reports and CUP** are:

✓ **Obesity**

Raises risk for colorectal cancer, post-menopausal breast cancer, esophageal cancer, endometrial cancer, kidney cancer, pancreatic cancer and gallbladder cancer.

✓ **Insufficient Physical Activity**

Raises risk for colorectal cancer, post-menopausal breast cancer and endometrial cancer.

✓ **Diets Low in Vegetables and Fruits**

Raise risk for colorectal cancer, stomach cancer, prostate cancer, esophageal cancer, lung cancer and mouth/pharynx/larynx cancer.

✓ **Alcohol**

Raises risk for colorectal cancer, breast cancer (pre- and post-menopausal), esophageal cancer, mouth/pharynx/larynx cancer and liver cancer.

✓ **Diets High in Red Meat**

Raises risk for colorectal cancer.

✓ **Cured Meats (Meat Preserved by Salt, Nitrates, Nitrites or Sugar)**

Raises risk for colorectal cancer.

## RANKED RESULTS OF AICR'S 2013 CANCER RISK AWARENESS SURVEY

The percentage of Americans who answered “YES” when asked if each of the following factors has a significant effect on whether or not the average person develops cancer, ranked from highest percentage to lowest:

(NOTE: **The six established cancer risks highlighted in AICR's expert reports and CUP are in bold.**)

1. Tobacco*	92 percent	16. Diets high in fat	45 percent
2. Inherited predisposition/cancer genes**	86 percent	<b>17. Diets low in vegetables and fruits</b>	<b>43 percent</b>
3. Excessive exposure to the sun*	84 percent	18. Artificial sweeteners	40 percent
4. Industrial pollution (tie)	83 percent	<b>19. Alcohol</b>	<b>38 percent</b>
5. Radiation (tie)*	83 percent	20. Trans-fats	37 percent
6. Asbestos*	79 percent	<b>21. Cured meats (tie)</b>	<b>36 percent</b>
7. Pesticide residue on produce***	72 percent	<b>22. Insufficient physical activity (tie)</b>	<b>36 percent</b>
8. Nuclear power	64 percent	<b>23. Diets high in red meat</b>	<b>35 percent</b>
9. Radon (tie)*	56 percent	24. Breast implants	34 percent
10. Food additives (tie)	56 percent	25. Power lines	31 percent
11. Genetically modified foods (tie)	51 percent	26. Cell phones	30 percent
12. Viruses and bacteria (tie)****	51 percent	27. Grilling meat (tie)	21 percent
13. Stress	50 percent	28. Sugar (tie)	21 percent
<b>14. Overweight/Obesity</b>	<b>48 percent</b>	29. Coffee	6 percent
15. Hormones in beef	46 percent		

\*These factors are known to be legitimate cancer risks, though they are not highlighted in AICR's expert reports or the CUP.

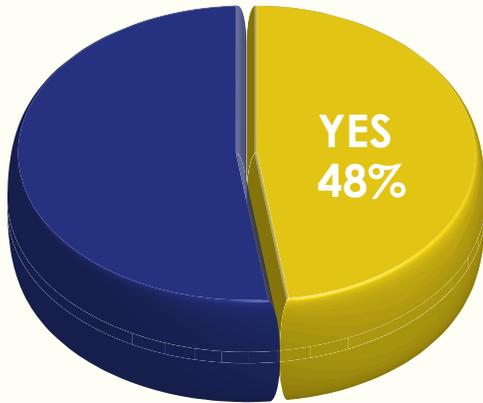
\*\* Only about 5-10 percent of all cancers are caused by “cancer genes” – most cases occur in individuals who do not possess them. Nonetheless, being born with BRCA1, BRCA2 or other cancer genes does increase risk.

\*\*\*A great deal of evidence links high daily exposure to pesticides (as occurs among farm workers) to cancer, but the evidence on lower levels of exposure is far less clear.

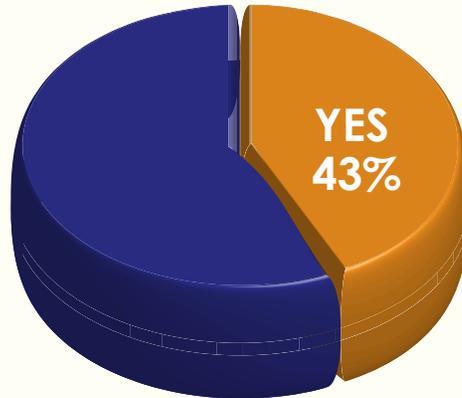
\*\*\*\*Several viruses, including the human papilloma virus, have been linked to various cancers.

## Which of the following do you believe has a significant effect on whether or not the average person develops cancer? (% of YES responses)

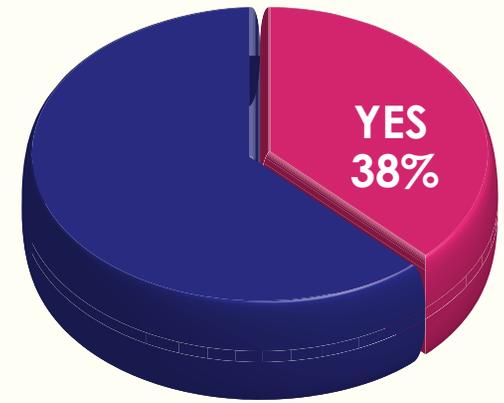
Overweight/Obesity



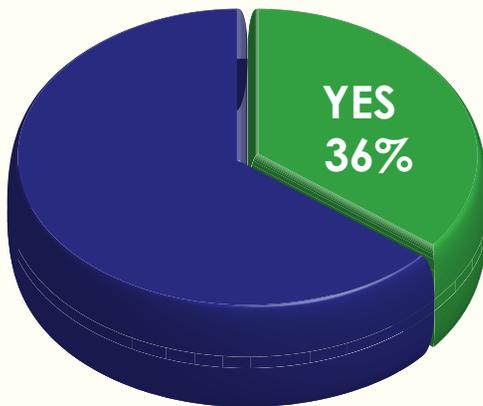
Diets low in vegetables and fruits



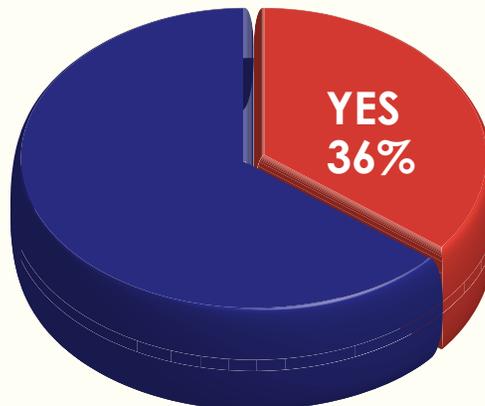
Alcohol



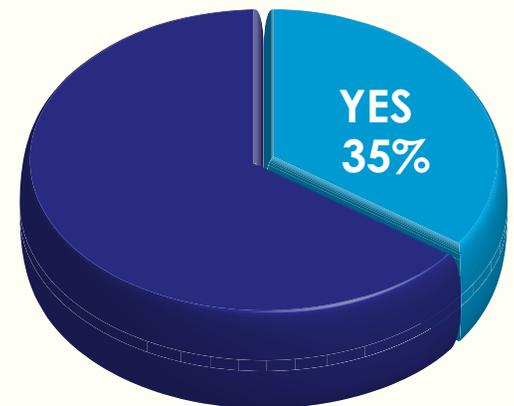
Cured meats



Insufficient physical activity



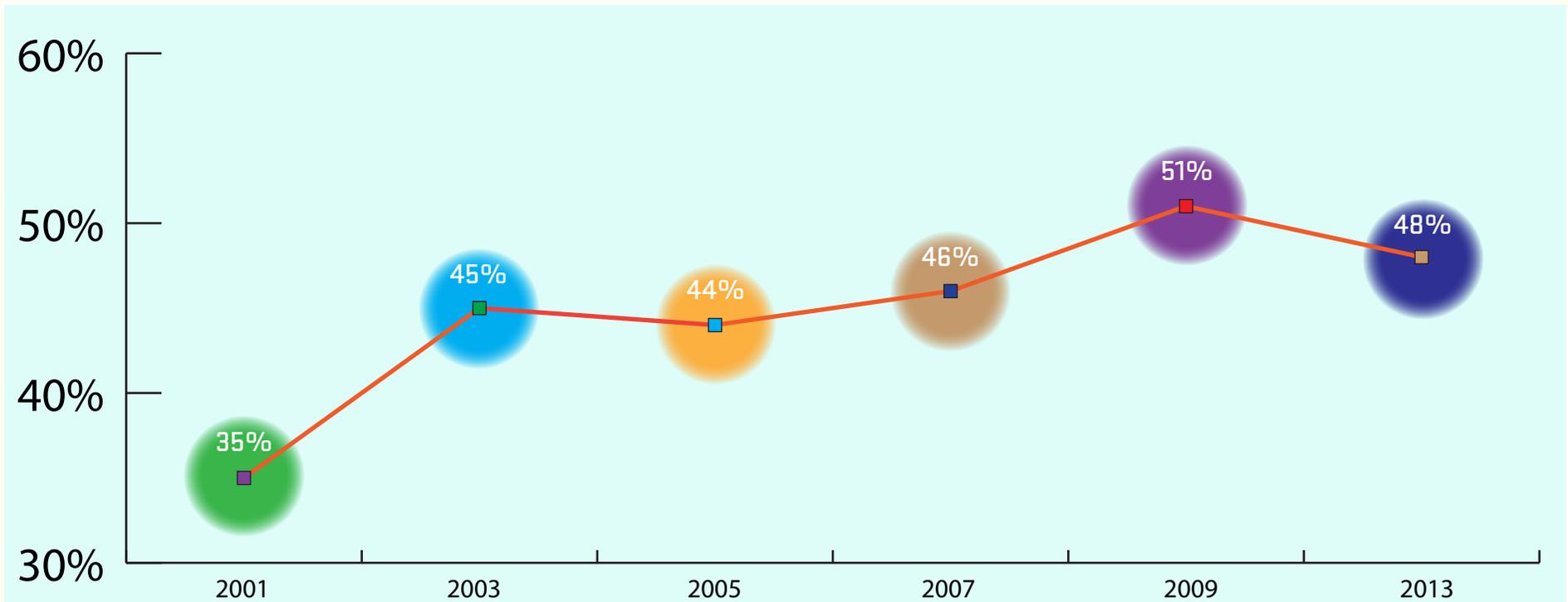
Diets high in red meat



## **PART ONE:**

# **Selected Trends in Cancer Risk Awareness for Risks Highlighted in AICR's Reports**

## Overweight/Obesity



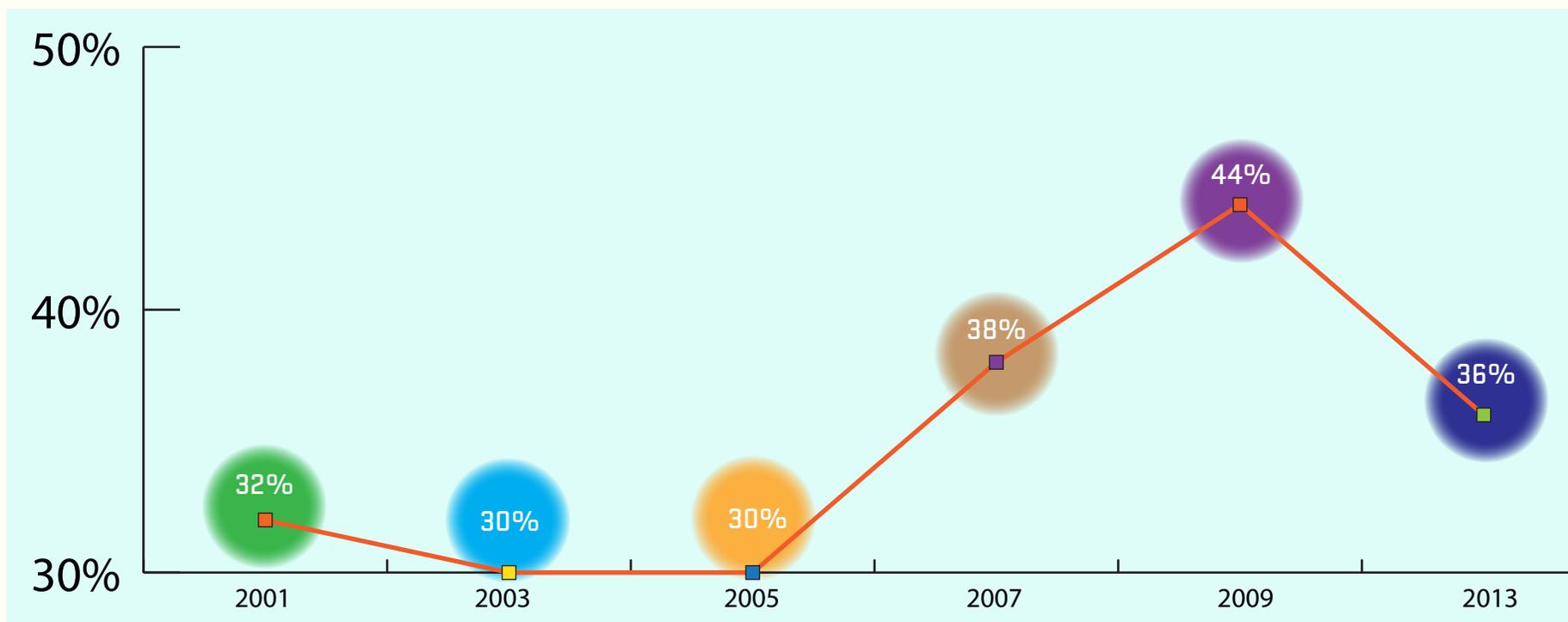
### TREND

After rising to over 50% for the first time in the history of the survey in 2009, awareness that obesity is a cancer risk factor suffers a modest drop (within the survey's margin of error) down to 48%.

### AICR's TAKE

Apart from not smoking, being at a healthy weight is the single most important step Americans can take to protect themselves from cancer. AICR wants to see this number much, much higher than it is, on par with those for widely known risk factors like tobacco and excessive sun exposure.

# Cured Meats (Meats Preserved By Salt, Nitrates, Nitrites or Sugar)



## TREND

A steady and moderately steep increase since 2005, followed by a worrisome 8-point drop.

## AICR's TAKE

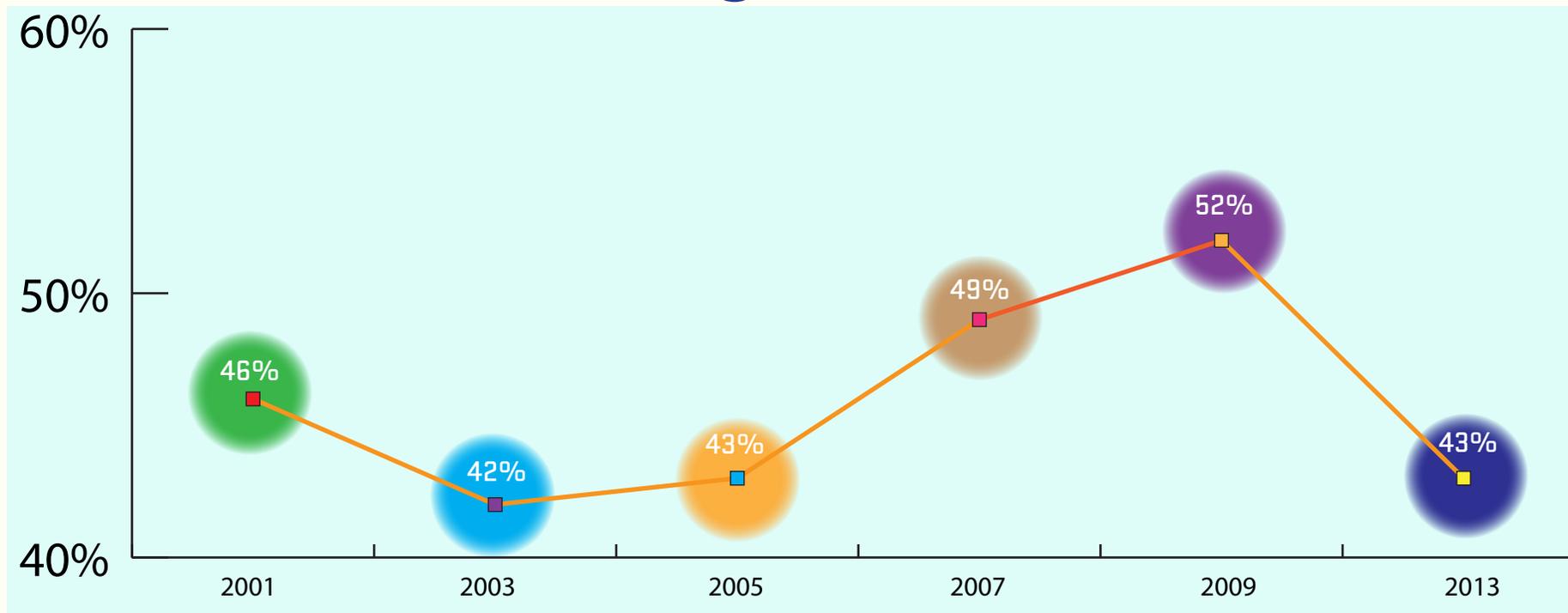
When it comes to cancer risk, AICR recommends limiting red meat, if eaten at all (see **Diets High in Red Meat** on page 11). This is because modest consumption (18 ounces [cooked] or less per week) is not associated with an increase in colorectal cancer risk.

The same does not hold true for processed meat (a category that includes cured meats like bacon, ham, hot dogs and cold cuts). Even small amounts of processed meat, consumed regularly, make colorectal cancer more likely. This is why AICR recommends avoiding these foods in general, and saving them for special occasions.

Yet many busy American families turn to processed meats – especially hot dogs – as a convenient everyday snack for kids. Today only about 1 in 3 Americans knows of the clear link between these foods and increased cancer risk. This number needs to be much higher.

# AICR 2013 Cancer Risk Awareness Survey Report

## Diets Low in Vegetables and Fruits



### TREND

Awareness that diets lacking plant foods like vegetables and fruits increase cancer risk has been rising steadily since 2003, but now experiences a nine-point drop.

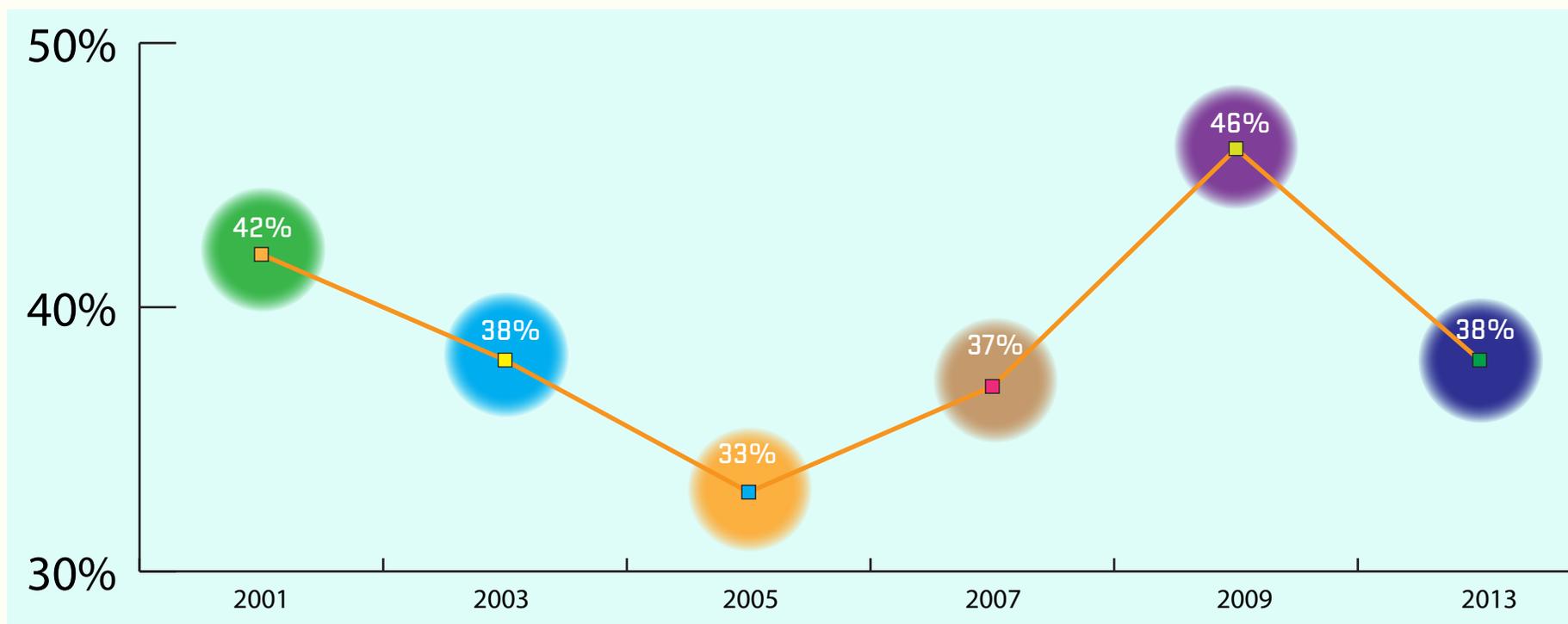
### AICR's TAKE

This significant and worrisome drop in awareness may reflect recent headlines proclaiming that fruits and vegetables play only a small role in cancer prevention. Those headlines, however, were based on a single study.

When results from many studies are collectively assessed (as they are in the AICR/WCRF Continuous Update Project), the evidence that fruits and vegetables can protect against specific cancers is strong enough to recommend that people make them an important part of their diet.

In addition to their direct effect on cancer risk, fruits and vegetables are low in calorie-density, which means they can help prevent the buildup of body fat that research shows increases risk for many cancers (see **Overweight/Obesity** on page 6.)

## Alcohol



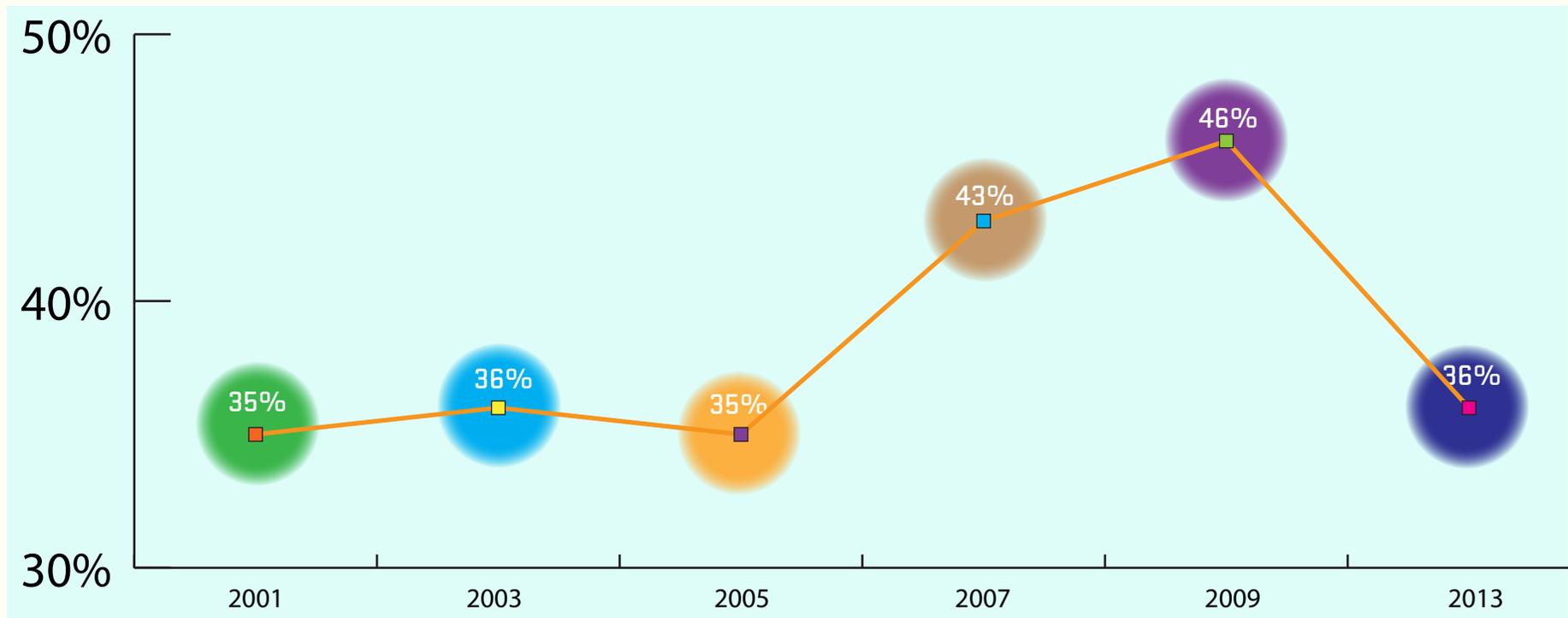
### TREND

An eight-point drop in awareness, which had previously been trending upward.

### AICR's TAKE

Messages about the potential heart-health benefits of modest alcohol intake may be clouding the alcohol-cancer link in the minds of Americans. Nonetheless, alcohol remains a clear and convincing cause of several cancers, and the best advice, when it comes to cancer risk, is not to drink at all.

## Insufficient Physical Activity



### TREND

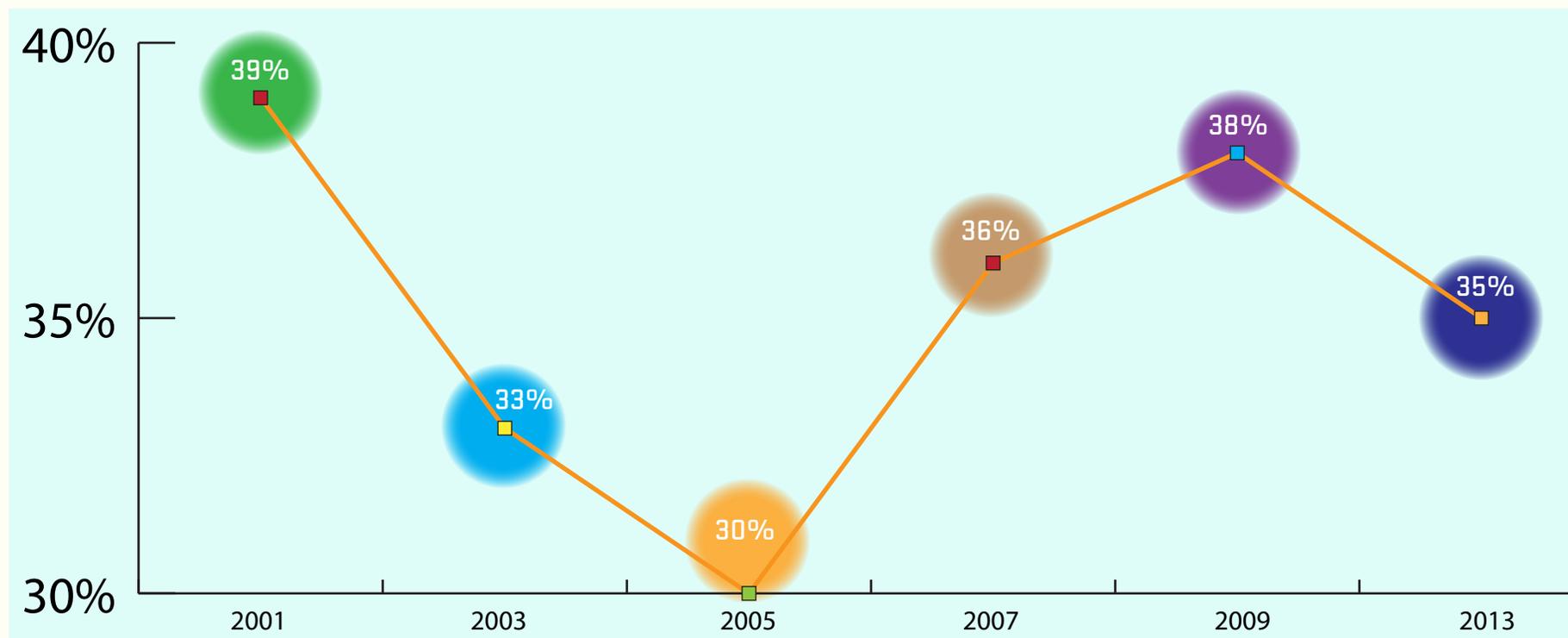
At ten points, this is the survey's largest and most alarming drop in awareness. It effectively negates the steadily rising awareness of this risk factor witnessed over the last twelve years.

### AICR's TAKE

When it comes to lowering cancer risk, there are no "magic bullets" – but regular physical activity comes pretty close. Being active protects against cancer both directly (by helping to regulate the body's hormone levels) and indirectly (by helping to prevent the buildup of excess body fat, itself a cause of several cancers).

But we are becoming an increasingly sedentary country, as screen time increases and commutes get longer. This is precisely the worst possible time for awareness of this key cancer-protective strategy to be on the wane.

## Diets High in Red Meat



### TREND

Awareness of this important cancer risk factor has vacillated over the course of the survey. The latest modest drop in awareness is small, but worth watching.

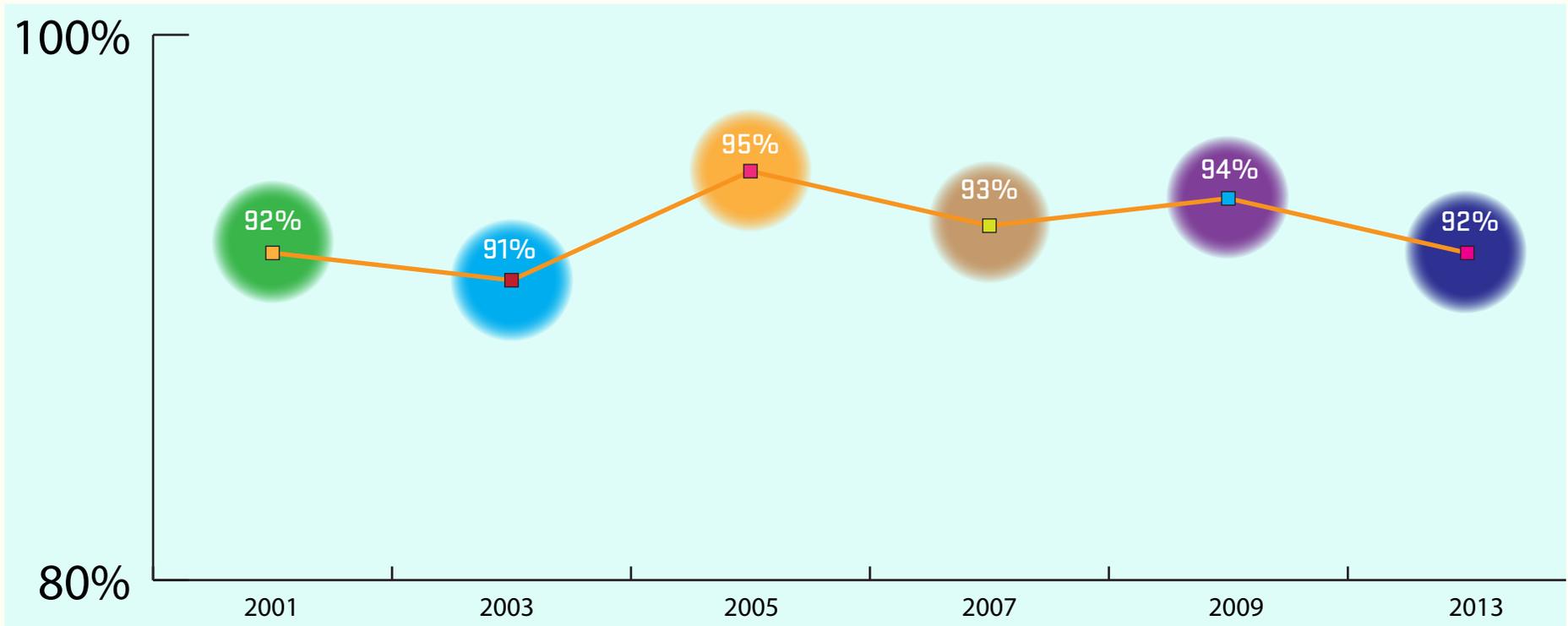
### AICR's TAKE

The traditional American meal, which consists of a large chunk of red meat (beef, pork, lamb) with some starchy vegetables on the side, has to change. At high levels of red meat consumption, risk for colorectal cancer increases markedly. It is dismaying that 2 out of 3 Americans have not heard this message.

For cancer protection, AICR recommends that those who choose to eat red meat at all limit themselves to no more than 18 ounces (cooked) per week.

**PART TWO:**  
**Selected Trends for Other Notable  
Cancer Risks**

# Tobacco



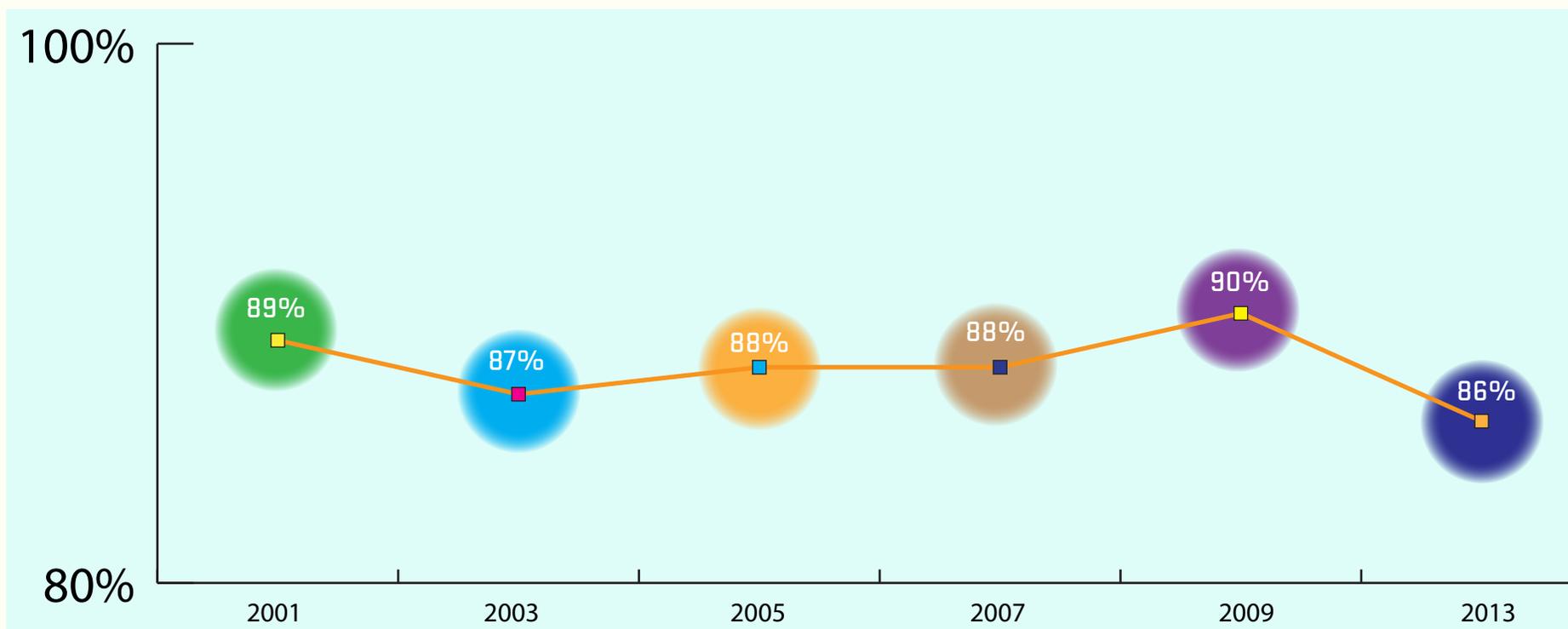
## TREND

Holding steady.

## AICR's TAKE

We're encouraged that health messages about such a clear and convincing risk for many cancers are being heard.

# Inherited Predisposition/Cancer Genes



## TREND

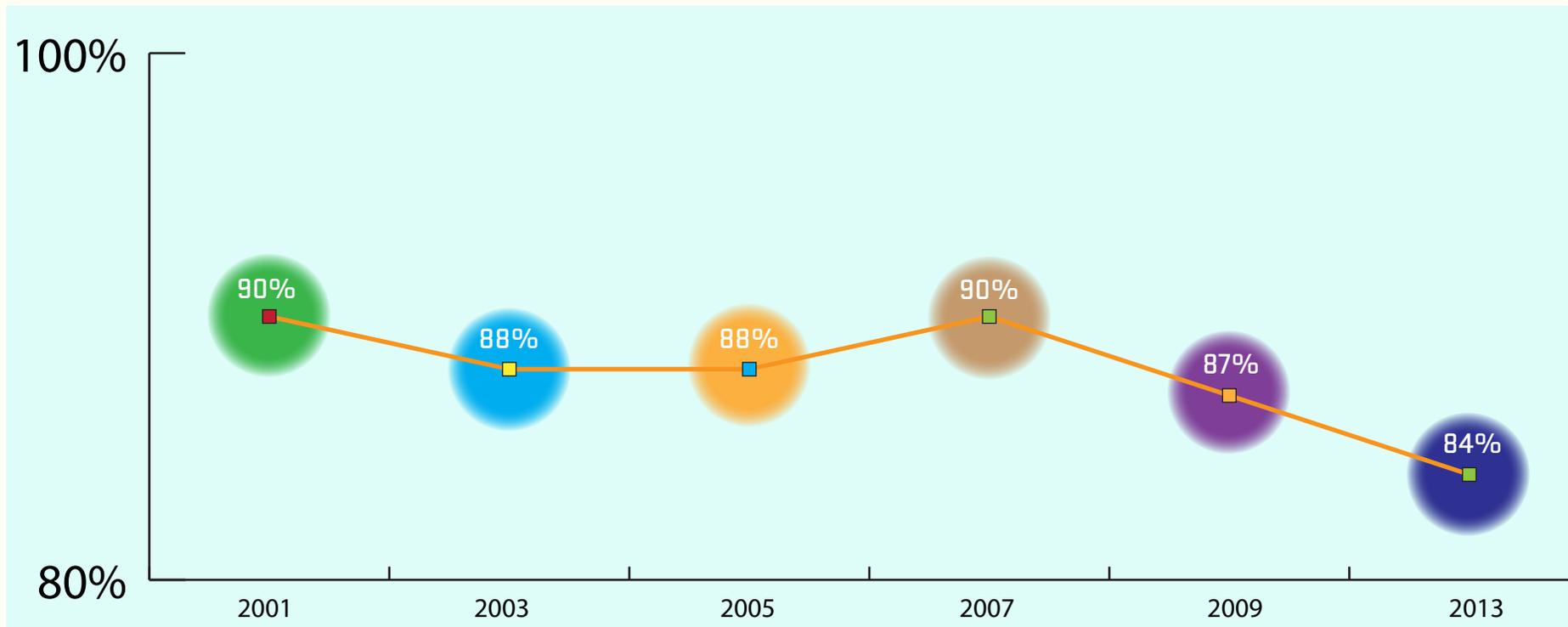
Holding steady.

## AICR's TAKE

It's true that individuals born with BRCA1, APC or other "cancer genes" are at increased risk for cancer.

Note, however, that respondents were asked if they thought various factors have a significant effect on whether or not the **average person** develops cancer. And the vast majority of cancers that occur – as many as 95 percent, by some estimates – occur in individuals who do not possess these genes.

# Excessive Exposure to the Sun



## TREND

Gradually dropping.

## AICR's TAKE

There's no question that sun exposure increases risk for skin cancer, the most common form of the disease. Given the sheer number of skin cancers that occur in the US every year, the fact that awareness of this risk factor has dropped six points over the past six years is troubling.

## METHODOLOGY

The AICR Cancer Risk Awareness Survey has been conducted periodically since 2001. A random sample of Americans aged 18 and older is telephoned on behalf of AICR by SSRS (formerly ICR) using the EXCEL omnibus service.

2001: 750 respondents. Margin of error: +/- 4 percent.

2003: 1,025 respondents. Margin of error: +/- 3 percent.

2005: 1,010 respondents. Margin of error: +/- 3 percent.

2007: 1,022 respondents. Margin of error: +/- 3 percent.

2009: 1,021 respondents. Margin of error: +/- 3 percent.

2011: No survey was conducted.

2013: 1,026 respondents. Margin of error: +/- 3 percent.

(30 percent of respondents were reached by cell phone.)

Respondents are read the following question: “Which of the following do you believe has a significant effect on whether or not the average person develops cancer?”

The 29 risk factors are randomly ordered, and read to respondents one at a time; to each, respondents answer “Yes,” “No” or “Don’t Know.”

Raw data tables of the 2013 survey, including breakdowns by sex, age, household income, region, education, race and metro status, are available upon request: [communications@aicr.org](mailto:communications@aicr.org)