THE ALPENA NEWS

Bad, but getting better

Alpena goes from 5th- to 16th-highest cancer rate

News Photo by Darby Hinkley The entrance to the Alpena Cancer Center is seen on Friday.

ALPENA -A recent study released by the Michigan Cancer Consortium ranked Alpena County fifth in the state of Michigan for new cancer rates from 2010 to 2014, but the 2011 to 2015 numbers bring Alpena to 16th out of 83 counties, MCC Co-Chair Tom Rich said on Friday.

He said about 210 people are diagnosed with cancer each year in Alpena County.

"The cancer rate for Alpena County is dropping, so that's good news," Rich said. *"Sixteenth isn't great, but it's better than fifth."*

The new report covering data through 2015 wasn't yet available online.

The MCC's 2017 Annual Report includes data from 2010-2014, which reveals the top five counties for the highest rate of new cancer in Michigan were Osceola, Wexford, Grand Traverse, Wayne and Alpena.

Alpena was one of only 12 counties considered *"significantly higher than the state rate,"* which is 464.05 cases of new cancer per 100,000 residents, according to the MCC report.

Health officials blame smoking, poor eating habits and lack of exercise for the higher rates, although genetics and environmental factors play a role, as well.

"The biggest factors we know of are lifestyle factors," said Dr. Josh Meyerson, medical director of District Health Department No. 4, which covers the counties of Alpena, Cheboygan, Montmorency and Presque Isle.

He said the study found higher rates of lung cancer and colorectal cancer in Alpena County.

"You increase rates through smoking and obesity," Meyerson said. *"Smoking rates certainly are higher in our area, when compared to the rest of the state."*

Eating too many cured meats and red meat can contribute to a higher risk for colorectal cancer, Meyerson said.

He added that there is no conclusive evidence to show whether pollution has contributed to the area's higher rates.

"Overall, our air and water is probably cleaner than other parts of the state," Meyerson said. *"There may be pockets of concern, but we don't have good data to support or refute those claims."*

Of Michigan's 83 counties, 31 rated "similar to the state rate" and 39 rated *"significantly lower than the state rate."* Results were not available from Keweenaw County, the least populous and northernmost county in the state.

Alcona, Montmorency and Presque Isle counties were among the 31 counties ranked "*similar to the state rate."*

"It could be a statistical glitch because we are small counties," Meyerson said.

Rich echoed that sentiment, saying, *"The lower the population in a county, the more fluctuation you may have. It takes awhile for the cancer registries to scrub this data. Hospitals have six to nine months to repor-t the data."*

He added that the results have been age-adjusted to account for an aging population in some counties.

"Cancer is a disease of age," he explained. *"The older you get, the more likely you are to get it."*

Over the four-year period the study spans, cancer rates in Michigan steadily decreased from 490.3 per 100,000 in 2010 to 438.2 per 100,000 in 2014, bringing the state average closer to the national average of 436.6 per 100,000.

Michigan's cancer mortality rate has remained higher than the U.S. average, however, at 173.1 per 100,000 in 2014, versus 161.3 per 100,000 nationwide.

In 2018, 56,590 Michiganders are estimated to be diagnosed with cancer, and 21,380 are likely to die from it, the MCC study says, referencing the American Cancer Society's *"Cancer Statistics Center: Michigan at a Glance 2018."*

The MCC, established in 1988, consists of roughly 100 organizations statewide whose collaborative goal is improving cancer prevention and control.

Rich and Meyerson noted a number of measures residents can take to decrease their cancer risk.

"Stop smoking, of course," Meyerson said, *adding that smokers can call the* Michigan Tobacco QuitLine at 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669). *"You want to look at reducing your consumption of red meat. Eating more fruits and vegetables can decrease your risk of colorectal cancer."*

He added exercising daily is also important to maintaining good health.

"You don't have to go do crazy workouts," Meyerson noted. *"We are just talking about moving your body for at least 30 minutes a day."*

He recommends colorectal screenings for anyone over the age of 50, and human papilloma virus vaccines for those ages 11 to 26, to prevent cervical cancer and sexually transmitted diseases.

"That's not going to change the rates today, but they should improve 20 to 30 years . down the line," Meyerson said.

"The takeaway message is that 75 to 90 percent of all cancers occur because of lifestyles," Rich explained. *"We can't really control our genes, and we can't really control the environment. But you can control your own behaviors."*

To view the report, visit michigancancer.org/PublicationsProducts/MCCAnnualRpt.html.

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