The earlier in life that people realize there is a connection between healthy living and a lower risk of getting cancer, the longer and healthier their lives will be. When the Canadian Cancer Society Alberta/NWT Division and the Alberta Cancer Board's Prevention Program began working with adolescents to develop cancer prevention materials, they found little published information on what young people know and think about cancer and its prevention. Because this type of information would be very useful in addressing adolescents' concerns about cancer and filling any knowledge gaps when developing curricula materials, a survey of junior high school students' attitudes about and knowledge of cancer prevention was conducted.

The survey was administered to 262 students in a convenience sample of five schools in Calgary, Alberta selected to reflect a range of socio-economic levels. The survey was administered by teachers to one grade 9 class and all grade 7 students per school and took about 15 minutes to complete. Students were told that the questionnaire was designed to find out how much they knew about cancer, and the at their responses would be used to develop educational materials for junior high school students around the province.

The questionnaire was open-ended and in two parts. The first part included questions assessing general knowledge on cancer and its consequences, ways to avoid getting cancer and what students would like to know about cancer. The second part asked about three specific areas amenable to cancer prevention: sun exposure, diet and tobacco use. Students could mention more than one response per question, thus percentages do not sum to 100. The results presented here represent the 246 students who indicated gender (112 boys and 134 girls).

Students in the survey consider cancer to be a serious disease, not particularly amenable to treatment, and caused by many things including tobacco use, sun tanning or exposure to UV light, diet and heredity. About half the students mentioned avoiding tobacco use as important in preventing cancer. Behaviours related to sun exposure were mentioned more often, followed by general statements relating to eating habits. Twenty-seven percent were unable to identify any ways of to avoid getting cancer.

Specific knowledge of dietary practices recommended to reduce cancer risk was poor, with fewer than 10% of students mentioning high fibre or low fat as important dietary habits. Knowledge of factors related to skin cancer was better, with 53% of students mentioning avoiding the sun exposure/sunburn was a way to reduce the risk of skin cancer. Over one third of the students could not name any disease caused by tobacco use. The majority of students (71%) wanted more information about cancer.

Although very few of the students in the survey volunteered that there was nothing that could be done to prevent cancer, over one-quarter were unable to identify even one way to avoid cancer. Thus the results indicate a need for the development of cancer prevention materials for inclusion in junior high school curricula.