

Is cancer a contagious disease?

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no... ..but research reveals new
links between everyday bugs and life-threatening diseases

In late June, a report in The New England Journal of Medicine roused infections-disease experts around the world. It described how a 12-year nationwide vaccination program against rampant hepatitis B in Taiwan brought a decrease in cases of childhood liver cancer.

It was a remarkable development: An effort to combat an infectious disease had also proven effective against cancer. Cancer and contagion. That's a terrifying association—one that most doctors are loath to make. It's also misleading by any conventional definition of contagion.

Nonetheless, a growing and highly respected community of researchers in cancer and infectious diseases believes that microorganisms—viruses, bacteria, and parasites—play a significant role in cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and other illnesses that are not traditionally regarded as infectious. In essence, the bugs are "cofactors." In that regard, the Taiwan study "is very significant," says Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Early hints

The idea is not new. A hundred years ago, doctors noted a connection between cervical cancer and sexual promiscuity that transcended mere coincidence. By the 1960s, a connection between microbes and animal cancers had become well established, but scientists failed to demonstrate the same association in humans. Even today, some researchers resist the notion of infectious cofactors because in the case of cancer—hundreds of millions of people worldwide carry the suspect agents, yet don't get sick. Nevertheless, scientists armed with exceedingly powerful research tools are drawing new microbial connections to noninfectious diseases at a faster rate than ever before. For the first time, it is possible to make absolute

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associations between some microbes and cancer, says Fauci.

The link between hepatitis B and liver cancer, he says, is a "slam dunk." The same is true of human papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer. Researchers have drawn weaker but no less tantalizing connections between *Helicobacter pylori*—the bacterium that causes ulcers—and two types of stomach cancer. The common parasite *Chlamydia pneumoniae* could be associated with cardiovascular diseases. In Japan, a retrovirus called HTLV-1 has long been linked with leukemia. Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) is associated with a common lymphoma in Africa. And Kaposi's sarcoma herpes virus (KSHV), discovered in 1993 by Patrick Moore and Yuan Chang at Columbia University, ap