

People & Parties

Dr. Margaret I. Cuomo Discusses National Cancer Prevention Day

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We sat down with Dr. Margaret I. Cuomo to find out why she thinks most cancers are preventable, and what she hopes for the future of **National Cancer Prevention Day** (happening today, February 4).



Margaret I. Cuomo with her book, *A World Without Cancer*, at a Hampton's event in 2013.

Margaret I. Cuomo, M.D., the oldest daughter of former New York Governor Mario Cuomo and sister to current New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and CNN's Chris Cuomo, can hold her own in her famous family. She's a radiologist, author, and health blogger, but perhaps her biggest role yet is as board member of **Less Cancer**—an organization that strives to educate the public on ways to reduce the risk for cancer *before* it starts.

For the past three years, part of Less Cancer's mission has been National Cancer Prevention Day (February 4), and this year, Cuomo will mark the date by moderating a panel of experts in Washington, D.C. who will talk about preventing cancer. Among the attendees will be politicians from both sides of

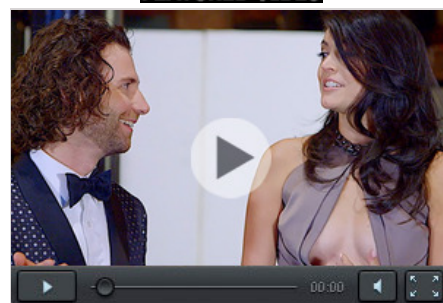
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the aisle, and experts in public health, public policy, cancer prevention, and other fields.

Personalities in attendance will include Dr. Graham A. Colditz, a pioneer for cancer prevention from Washington University in St. Louis; Deborah Raphael, Director of the San Francisco Department of the Environment; and Dr. David Widawsky, who is Director of the Division of Chemistry, Economics, and Sustainable Strategies within the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention. Jon Whelan will receive the Less Cancer Leadership Award this year.

We recently sat down with Cuomo to talk about how you can prevent cancer, why she got inspired to write her book, *A World Without Cancer*, and what she hopes for future National Cancer Prevention Days.

There hasn't been a lot of discussion on how to *prevent* cancer in particular. Why do you think this is an important conversation to have and why have it now?

MARGARET CUOMO: Well, it's an essential conversation and it's one that people like me, people involved in public health, people involved, even in scientific research, have been concerned about for decades. But you're right. Most of the focus of the public and of our government has been on the treatment of cancer, not on the prevention of it. Now, especially with the focus brought by the Affordable Care Act, more and more light is being shined on the significance of prevention, how it's more economically sensible for us to focus on prevention, rather than the cure. The cure, especially when it comes to cancer, is recognized now as an impossibility. You would never be able to cure all the cancers that are out there. Even in terms of just breast cancer, there are now at last count, 17 known types of breast cancer. So to say that you are going to target each one of them and knock out each one of them is unrealistic.

Why do you think it's important to get politicians on both sides involved in this issue?

MC: It's essential because without it we're not going to make any progress in this area on a national level. That's why I say if we cannot get the Congress to move to a point where they're willing to protect consumers, then we're going to have to say, "Okay, we're going to do this state-by-state."

You've also written a book on cancer prevention called *A World Without Cancer*. What inspired that?

MC: As a diagnostic radiologist, I was intimately involved with the cancer treatment of patients for so many years, and many of them were friends and family that came through my office. And it occurred to me that we're not doing the best we can do, that so much of this is preventable. Scientific research tells us that over 50 percent of all cancers are preventable. That's astounding, isn't it? And the other 50 percent is that unknown area that we still have to explore, including the toxic chemicals in products that we use in our daily lives. But diet, exercise, ending smoking, limiting or eliminating alcohol, protecting our skin from the sun, and managing stress can all contribute to that 50 percent reduction in cancer risk. So that's very significant.

What do you think is the most interesting thing you've learned while writing this book?

MC: Well, what I learned is that people are not aware [of] how much power we have in prevention. And that there is so much that we can do right now, and there's so much more we can do to reduce our risk, if, as I say, we had the protection in terms of regulating our products from chemicals and being more careful about our produce.

What are some everyday precautions that people can take to prevent cancer?

MC: It really is a cooperative approach. From the moment you wake up in the morning, read the label on the products you are using to brush your teeth and wash your face. And in my book I give a list of some chemicals that are very common that you want to avoid. So start with that. Then, what are you going to nourish yourself with? Do try to buy organic whenever you can. Buy seasonal fruits and vegetables, rather than looking for things that aren't grown in-season in the place where you live. Limit your intake of red meat. That's going to raise your risk for cancer. And processed meats, too—smoked meats. You want to try to cut down, or eliminate those from your diet altogether.

Try to have a plant-based diet. That means more vegetables, whole grains, and fruits. And protect your skin from the sun. Use safe products, lotions with an SPF of at least 30 to protect your skin. And of course if you're smoking, you're going to quit. And if you're not smoking now, you're not going to start. Despite all of the things we've read about the benefits of a glass of wine for your health, the truth is that alcohol does raise your risk for cancer. All the studies say so; so less is more. The less you drink, the better. And if you're not drinking now, don't start.

How do you think future National Cancer Prevention Days will be recognized? For example, there are red ribbons for World AIDS Day, pink ribbons for Breast Cancer Awareness Month, do you foresee anything like that in the future?

MC: What we don't want to have happen is that this becomes commercialized. We attach a color or whatever to it, and then nothing substantial happens. That's not our goal here. What we're trying to do, what I'm trying to do in particular, is to gather all segments of society—whether you're an adult or a child, member of the media, or medical community, public health advocate, cancer prevention advocate,

every segment of society has to be involved in this effort. We can all do our part. People in education can teach more about good nutrition, can rid their schools of soda and machines that sell unhealthy snacks. We all have to do our part, and the focus has to be on children. If we don't teach our children well, we can't expect them to develop good habits as they grow.

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