
The Emperor of All Maladies Summary PDF Cheatsheet —

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? 1. The Cancer Era: In ancient history, cancer was less common because fewer people reached old age

Ancient history almost never mentions cancer, while today it seems very common. The difference is today most people survive to an older age, when cancer is exponentially more likely to occur. We also have more accurate tools to screen and diagnose cancer, and novel carcinogens like cigarettes.

? 2. Black Bile: Ancient doctors like Galen believed all diseases were caused an imbalance of bodily fluids

Beginning with Galen in 160 AD, the medical world believed cancer was caused by a bodily fluid called “black bile.” This theory survived until the middle ages, when Vesalius discovered the fluid had never actually existed.

? 3. Radical Surgery: Early surgeons like Halsted believed cutting more would cure more cancer patients, without scientific proof

In 1846 and 1867, anesthesia and antiseptic were discovered, finally making surgery painless and safe from infection. Cancer tumors were removed locally through surgery and later X-rays. In the 1880’s, Halsted began radical surgeries for breast cancer, but it was proven to have no benefit only 90 years later after 500,000 women had been greatly disfigured.

? 4. Chemotherapy Develops: In the 1940’s, doctors found certain poisons could kill cancer a little faster than killing the patient

Chemotherapy is giving poisons to a patient, poisons that happen to be a little more effective killing the fastest growing cells, which means cancer. In 1947, Sidney Farber found the first real chemo treatment, blocking leukemia from the nutrient folic acid. After that, chemo developed through adding longer treatment, more combination drugs, stronger doses, and even continuing chemo long after all symptoms were gone.

? 5. Focus on Prevention: Lowering cancer deaths through early screening and reducing smoking in society

In 1986, the important Bailar-Smith analysis found cancer deaths had actually gone up over 30 years, due to neglect of cancer prevention. Beginning with the Doll/Hill study in 1947, a link between cigarettes and lung cancer was established, despite a propaganda war with the cigarette makers, and finally by the 1990’s there was a decrease in both smoking and death. Better early cancer screening techniques also reduced deaths, with the Pap smear in 1952 and mammography in 1976.

? 6. Cancer Viruses and Genes: Searching for a unified theory behind all the causes of cancer

In 1910, an RSV virus was discovered to cause cancer in chickens, and the viral theory of cancer became dominant until the 1970’s. Then researchers slowly uncovered that cancer is a disease caused by mutations in our existing genes. Chemicals, radiation, inflammation, viruses and more...

cause DNA mutations that “activate” genes for uncontrolled cell division.

? 7. Modern Targeted Treatments: Recent medications fight cancer more accurately, according to genetic pathways

There was a growing disconnect between the genetic understanding of cancer and old-style treatments still being used. In the late 1990’s, researchers finally began producing drugs like Herceptin and Gleevec that directly target cancer’s genetic pathways. And countless more are in development.

This is just a sample!

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