

# What we know about cancer beliefs in American Samoa

## Beliefs

Research conducted by the American Samoa Community Cancer Network 2006-08 and by the American Samoa Community Cancer Coalition in 2009 confirmed what others have previously found and uncovered several new beliefs and misconceptions American Samoans hold about cancer.

- ◆ Cancer was not amongst the most important health issues.  
Exercise, diet and diabetes rank highest (1, 2)
- ◆ Cancer is believed to be a new disease because many never heard of it when they were younger (1, 3)
- ◆ Cancer is not a Samoan illness; there is no word for the disease (1, 3, 4)
- ◆ Cancer is associated with hopelessness, worry, and a fear that death is near(1, 4)
- ◆ There was widespread knowledge of smoking leading to cancer (1)
- ◆ Cancer may be caused by
  - ◇ not taking local herbal medicine in time when feeling ill (1)
  - ◇ a punishment from God or God's will (1, 3, 5, 6)
  - ◇ spirit possession (1)
  - ◇ germs or uncleanness (1)
  - ◇ a shift in diet from traditional foods to processed foods containing "chemicals and preservatives"(1, 3)
- ◆ The mystery surrounding what causes cancer lead many towards religious comfort (1)
- ◆ Older women and men are more likely to believe cancer can be treated or cured by a traditional Samoan healer (2, 4)
- ◆ Older women and men are more likely to recommend a cancer patient see a traditional Samoan healer (2, 4)
- ◆ Cancer patients are sometimes treated for *mumu* (swelling) or *oloa* (persistent ulcer) by traditional Samoan healers (4)
- ◆ People get most cancer information from the hospital, Samoan healers (Taulasea/Fofa), church pastors, and cancer survivors (1)
- ◆ Cancer has identifiable symptoms such that you can tell if someone is sick (1, 2, 4)
- ◆ Both men and women can have prostate cancer (2)
- ◆ You can get prostate cancer from sexual intercourse (2)

*"Cancer is a disease people hardly get. We should be afraid of diabetes."*

*"We should pity those who have cancer because there is no testing and no cure."*

*"If you have cancer you should not tell another person because they can't help."*

*"...if women don't live healthy it will lead to cancer."*

*"Because the disease is new we go to the doctor or to the Lord. The Lord is the only cure. The Father in Heaven is the Doctor of all doctors."*

*"If I were diagnosed I would rely on God."*

*"[If diagnosed], all we can do is pray." (1)*

## Sources

(1) Krosch S. Men's Health Awareness & Prostate Cancer Screening Clinic Program Evaluation. The American Samoa Community Cancer Network. July 2008. NCI Grant #U01CA114590 (2) Krosch S. Men's Prostate Cancer Screening Clinic Program Impact Evaluation Results. The American Samoa Community Cancer Network. August 2008. NCI Grant #U01CA114590 (3) Hubbell FA, et al. Exploring beliefs about cancer among American Samoans: focus group findings. *Cancer Detection and Prevention*. 2005;29:109-115. (4) Krosch S and Tuitoa V. Complementary and Alternative Medicine for Cancer in American Samoa. Pacific-CEED Legacy Project formative research for the development of a radio serial drama. April 2009. CDC #5U58DP000976-03 (5) Mishra SI, et al. Knowledge of and Attitudes about Cancer among American Samoans. *Cancer Detection and Prevention*. 2000; 24:186-95. (6) Ishida D et al. Beliefs and Attitudes of Samoan Women toward Early Detection of Breast Cancer and Mammography Utilization. *Cancer*. 2001;91(1) 262-266.