

Why is cancer so prolific?

By George Johnson, New York Times

Every New Year when the government publishes its Report to the Nation on the Status of Cancer, it is followed by a familiar lament. We are losing the war against cancer.

Half a century ago, the story goes, a person was far more likely to die from heart disease. Now cancer is on the verge of overtaking it as the No. 1 cause of death.

Troubling as this sounds, the comparison is unfair. Cancer is, by far, the harder problem – a condition deeply ingrained in the nature of evolution and multicellular life. Given that obstacle, cancer researchers are fighting and even winning smaller battles: reducing the death toll from childhood cancers and preventing – and sometimes curing – cancers that strike people in their prime. But when it comes to diseases of the elderly, there can be no decisive victory. This is, in the end, a zero-sum game.

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