

Healthy eating to reduce cancer risk

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To reduce the risk of certain cancers, the Cancer Council recommends a healthy body weight, regular exercise and a healthy diet. The following provides information about the types of food that we should include or limit in our diets to help reduce the risk of cancer.

Vegetables and fruits

Eating plenty of vegetables and fruits is likely to reduce the risk of cancer of the mouth, oesophagus, stomach and bowel.

Recommendation

Eat plenty of vegetables, legumes and fruits. Adults should eat at least five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit each day. The number of serves recommended for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding is higher, and the recommendations for children are slightly lower. Eat a variety of vegetables and fruit. It doesn't matter if the source is fresh, tinned, frozen or dried – it all counts.

What is a serve?

1 serve of vegetables =

- ½ cup of cooked vegetables
- 1 cup of salad
- ½ cup of legumes (such as lentils and chickpeas)

1 serve of fruit =

- 2 pieces of small-sized fruit (such as apricots, plums and kiwi-fruit)
- 1 cup of fruit salad or canned fruit pieces

A serve size is about the same as an adult's handful. So, adults should eat five handfuls of vegetables and two handfuls of fruit every day.

Breads and cereals

While there has been a lot of research into the link between a high fibre diet and a decrease in bowel cancer risk, the link does not appear to be as strong as once thought.

Recommendation

In the interest of good health, the Cancer Council recommends eating plenty of breads and cereals, preferably wholegrain, as part of an overall healthy diet.

Women should eat at least four serves of breads and cereals a day and men should eat at least five.

What is a serve?

- 2 slices of bread
- 1 cup of cooked rice, pasta or noodles
- 1 cup of breakfast cereal
- ½ cup of muesli

Meat

Research suggests that eating red meat and, in particular, processed meat, may increase the risk of bowel cancer.

Recommendation

The Cancer Council recognises that red meat is important for supplying iron, zinc, vitamin B12 and protein in the Australian diet. However, because of a possible link with bowel cancer, no more than three to four serves a week of cooked red meat is recommended. On other days try fish, chicken and other alternatives. Limit processed meats, such as sausages, frankfurts, bacon and ham.

What is a serve?

- 65–100 grams of cooked meat or chicken (for example, ½ cup of mince, or 2 small chops, or 2 slices roast meat)
- 80–120 grams of fish
- 2 small eggs
- ½ cup of cooked legumes (such as chickpeas, lentils, beans)

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Fat

According to current evidence there is no direct link between fat intake and cancer. However, a high-fat diet may cause obesity, which is a risk factor for several cancers.

Recommendation

As part of an overall healthy diet, limit saturated fats and moderate total fat intake.

Saturated fats are found mostly in meat and dairy products, but are also found in cakes, biscuits, snack foods and take-away foods.

'Good fats' (polyunsaturated and mono-unsaturated) can be found in margarines, nuts, avocados and seeds.

Salt

An increased risk of stomach cancer has been linked with high-salt diets in countries where salting of foods is a common preserving method.

In countries where refrigeration is commonly used, stomach cancer is not as common.

Recommendation

Choose foods low in salt.

Flavour foods with herbs, lemon juice and spices instead of salt. Try to limit salty snacks, take-away foods, processed meats, cheese and butter.

Alcohol

There is no evidence that alcoholic drinks provide any protection against cancer. Alcohol is, in fact, an important risk factor for some cancers, particularly cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus and liver, and evidence is growing stronger that alcohol is a risk factor for breast cancer.

Recommendation

The Cancer Council recommends that, to reduce the risk of cancer, alcohol consumption should be limited or avoided.

For people who do drink alcohol, the recommended amounts are:

- for men – no more than two standard drinks a day
- for women – no more than one standard drink a day.

What is a standard drink?

- 285 ml of regular strength beer
- 100 ml of wine
- 30 ml of spirits

For more information

The National Health and Medical Research Council dietary guidelines provide detailed recommendations about healthy eating for all Australians. Information can be found at www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/dietsyn.htm

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