

Healthy eating to reduce cancer risk



To reduce the risk of certain cancers, Cancer Council recommends:

- a healthy body weight
- regular exercise, and
- a healthy diet.

This fact sheet provides information about the types of food and drink 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, throat, 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 breast feeding is higher, and the recommendations for children are slightly lower.

Eat a variety of vegetables and fruit. It doesn't matter if they are fresh, tinned, frozen or dried – it all counts.

What is a serve?

1 serve of vegetables =

- 1/2 cup of cooked vegetables
- 1 cup of salad
- 1/2 cup of cooked beans, peas or lentils

1 serve of fruit =

- 2 pieces of small-sized fruit (such as apricots, plums and kiwi-fruit)
- 1 piece of medium-sized fruit (such as an apple or orange)
- 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.

Fibre and wholegrain cereals

Dietary fibre may help lower the risk of bowel cancer. Wholegrain and wholemeal breads and cereals are high in dietary fibre (as are fruits, vegetables, seeds, nuts and legumes).

Recommendation

Cancer Council recommends people eat at least four serves of breads and cereals each day and aim for at least half their daily serves to be wholegrain or wholemeal varieties

What is a serve?

- 1 slice of bread
- 1/2 cup of cooked rice, pasta or noodles
- 2/3 cup of wheat cereal flakes
- 1/4 cup of muesli

Meat and meat alternatives

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

Recommendation

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 red meat is recommended. On other days try fish, chicken and other alternatives. Adults should have 2–3 serves a day, depending on age and gender. Limit or avoid processed meats, such as sausages, frankfurts, bacon and ham.

What is a serve?

- 65 grams of cooked lean red meat
- 100 grams of fish
- 80 grams of cooked lean chicken or turkey
- 2 large eggs
- 30 grams of nuts, seeds or nut-based pastes
- 1 cup legumes (such as chick peas or lentils)

Dairy foods

In terms of cancer risk, dairy foods and calcium have shown both protective and harmful effects.

Overall the proven health benefits of dairy foods outweigh the unproven harms.

Recommendation

Dairy foods should be encouraged as part of a varied and nutritious diet as they are essential to maintain good bone and dental health. Cancer Council supports the Australian Dietary Guidelines, which encourage people to eat at least 2.5 serves of dairy foods (milk, cheese and yoghurt) each day.

Fat

According to current evidence there is no direct link between fat intake and cancer. However, a high-fat diet may cause excess body weight, which is a risk factor for several cancers including cancers of the bowel, kidney, pancreas, oesophagus and endometrium, as well as breast cancer (after menopause). Obesity also increases the risk of heart disease and diabetes.

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 fried take-away foods. 'Good fats' (polyunsaturated and monounsaturated) 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.

Too much salt can also lead to high blood pressure.

Recommendation

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

A 'low salt' food has less than 120 mg of sodium per 100 grams.

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 breast and bowel cancer, as well as cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus and liver.

Recommendation

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 amount is an average of no more than two standard drinks a day.

What is a standard drink?

- 375 ml bottle or can of mid-strength beer (3.5% alcohol volume)
- 100 ml of wine (one small glass of wine)
- 30 ml of spirits (one measure of spirits)

These are approximate numbers only. Always read the container for the exact number of standard drinks.

Sugar-sweetened beverages

Drinking sugar-sweetened beverages is associated with increased energy intake and in turn, weight gain and obesity. It is well established that obesity is a leading risk factor for some cancers.

The term 'sugar-sweetened beverages' includes sugar-sweetened soft drinks, energy drinks, fruit drink, sports drinks and cordial.

Recommendation

Adults and children should limit sugar-sweetened beverages and instead drink water or reduced fat milk.

For more information

The National Health and Medical Research Council dietary guidelines provide detailed recommendations about healthy eating for all Australians. Visit

www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/publications/n55

For Cancer Council's position statements on nutrition visit www.cancer.org.au/cancer-control-policy/position-statements/

Use the LiveLighter Meal and Activity Planner to help you improve your diet. Visit livelighter.com.au/planner

Last updated: Oct 2017

