

Breast Cancer Prevention Update

Fight breast cancer with diet strategies aimed at reducing your risk.

Breast cancer is the most commonly occurring cancer in women in the U.S. But changes in eating habits and physical activity could prevent about one in three cases, according to the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR).

Go Med. Findings of one study, known as PREDIMED, made big headlines reporting that women assigned to a Mediterranean diet were much less likely to develop breast cancer than women in the control group. Other studies show potential, but much less consistent support, for a Mediterranean diet to lower breast cancer risk.

AICR recommends an eating pattern focused around plant foods to lower overall cancer risk. A Mediterranean diet is one way, but not the only way, to accomplish that. Several studies that followed large groups of women for between 15 and 24 years have reported substantially lower risk of breast cancer among those who follow AICR's Recommendations for Cancer Prevention.

Vegetables: choose more and choose more variety. Giving vegetables a starring role in your daily diet may help reduce breast cancer risk, suggests emerging research. In several studies, women with higher blood levels of carotenoids (compounds found in orange, yellow, red, and green plants) have about 25 percent lower breast cancer risk compared to women with low levels. Blood levels of carotenoids are indicators of vegetable and fruit consumption. It's not clear, however, how much protection comes from total or specific

types of carotenoids, or from other nutrients in vegetables. In the laboratory, carotenoids and flavonoid compounds found in vegetables all show potential to support antioxidant defenses and thwart several stages in cancer's development. Think of how many different ways you can include carotenoid-rich options like carrots, winter squash, dark green leafy varieties, and tomatoes.

Include cruciferous vegetables frequently. Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale, cauliflower, radishes, and cabbage are a few examples. All provide compounds that may play cancer-protective roles. In laboratory studies, these compounds stimulate enzymes that detoxify carcinogens, turn on expression of tumor suppressor genes, and shift estrogen metabolism to favor a weaker, less cancer-promoting form. Evidence is still tentative, but an analysis of 13 studies found risk of breast cancer 15 percent lower among women who consumed the most cruciferous vegetables compared to those who consumed the least.

Eat more high-fiber plants. Boosting fiber with whole grains, fruits, beans, and nuts may also help reduce breast cancer risk. Fiber could offer protection through influences on hormone levels. However, fiber's tie to breast cancer risk is not clear, and could simply be a marker of foods that provide a wide variety of protective nutrients and phytochemicals.

Most breast cancer develops over many years; these high-fiber foods could begin protection early in life and continue into middle age and beyond. Some women are afraid to include soy foods,

Reduce Breast Cancer Risk with a Healthy Weight

For lower risk of breast cancer, by far the strongest effects come from reaching and maintaining a healthy weight and creating a lifestyle with frequent physical activity. Excess body fat raises risk of postmenopausal breast cancer through effects on insulin and reproductive hormones. Follow these tips:

- ✓ **Swap low-calorie vegetables** for refined grains, meats, and high-calorie snack foods to help cut calories without going hungry.
- ✓ **Choose calorie-free sparkling water** or unsweetened iced tea as alternatives to alcoholic drinks to avoid extra calories.
- ✓ **Even if getting the recommended 30 minutes or more of daily walking** or other physical activity doesn't lead to weight loss, research shows that it affects hormones that help lower risk of breast and other cancers.

but research has now dispelled fears about compounds called "phytoestrogens" and shown them to be a safe and healthful choice. Soy foods are even linked with lower breast cancer risk in Asian population studies, though protection may relate to consumption beginning in youth.

Turn to healthful fats. Some studies highlight a potential role for extra virgin olive oil in lowering breast cancer risk due to its polyphenol and tocopherol compounds. Although it's smart to avoid excess calories from heavy-handed use of oils, don't be afraid to use healthful oils in salad dressings or stir-fries; it may even increase nutrient absorption. This could include other vegetable oils, too; recent analysis combining several studies shows that polyunsaturated fat (found in vegetables oils) is not linked to breast cancer risk.

Watch out for alcohol.

Numerous studies confirm that to reduce breast cancer risk, women should limit alcohol to no more than one standard alcoholic drink per day, which equals 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of liquor. More than this poses greater cancer risk, but even a single daily drink poses some risk of breast cancer, according to research. [E](#)

—Karen Collins, MS, RDN, CDN, FAND

AICR's Top 10 Recommendations for Cancer Prevention

- 1 **Be as lean as possible** without becoming underweight.
- 2 **Be physically active** for at least 30 minutes every day.
- 3 **Avoid sugary drinks;** limit consumption of energy-dense foods.
- 4 **Eat more of a variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and legumes,** such as beans.
- 5 **Limit consumption of red meats and avoid processed meats.**
- 6 If consumed at all, **limit daily alcoholic drinks** to 2 for men, 1 for women.
- 7 **Limit consumption of salty foods** and foods processed with salt (sodium).
- 8 **Don't use supplements** to protect against cancer.
- 9 It is best for **mothers to breastfeed their infants exclusively** for up to 6 months.
- 10 After treatment, **cancer survivors should follow the recommendations** for cancer prevention.

