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Fight Cancer with Diet and Exercise

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Fight Cancer with Diet and Exercise

Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States, just slightly behind heart disease.

Sadly, most all of us have been impacted in some way by cancer, whether it be a family member, friend, colleague, acquaintance or ourselves. It is important to note that two-thirds of one's risk of cancer is influenced by genetics; the other one-third is influenced by lifestyle, specifically diet, exercise and maintaining a healthy body weight. Although genetics may outweigh lifestyle risk, reducing your risk by a third is worth the effort.

The American Institute of Cancer Research (AICR) has reviewed a large number of studies on the effects of food on cancer and has identified a variety of foods that have been found to be protective against cancer. Top on the list of cancer-fighting foods are fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans. Eating a diet rich in these foods is suggested to reduce your risk of cancer. The superpower in these foods are found in the phytochemicals hidden inside. Phytochemicals, which naturally occur in plant foods, have health-promoting properties. They provide plants with their color, odor and flavor, but, for us, they are helpful in other ways. Phytochemicals have been found to stimulate the immune system, block carcinogens, reduce inflammation and cancer growth, prevent DNA damage, repair DNA, slow cancer cell growth, regulate hormones, reduce oxidative damage, and trigger damaged cells to self-destruct before reproducing.

Foods found to be associated with the promotion of cancer and that the AICR recommends should be avoided or minimized are red meat and all processed meats. These foods have been found to be associated with an increased risk of colorectal and stomach cancer. Alcohol consumption can increase the risk of a variety of gastrointestinal, liver and breast cancers, and should be moderated, if consumed at all. Additionally, an excess intake of added sugars (not ones naturally occurring in

foods) has been found to increase cancer risk indirectly by adding additional calories to the diet which can lead to long-term weight gain. This weight gain may be associated with excessive body fat which has been found to be correlated to an increased risk of a variety of common cancers.

Physical activity also is an important part of the equation. Being physically active can help reduce cancer risk. In fact, the more often we move, the better it is for our health. On the flip side, the more sedentary we are, the more likely our risk of cancer. It was found that individuals who get the minimum recommended 30 minutes of exercise each day and are also physically active throughout the day, have the lowest cancer risk overall. Moving more frequently by small trips to the water fountain, copy machine or restroom throughout the day may be one way of lowering your cancer risk. For others, you may want to park farther away from the building when shopping, taking the stairs versus an elevator, or setting a reminder to get up and move for a couple minutes every hour. Although these lifestyle habits cannot completely negate our risk for cancer, they may help to be a part of the equation to reduce our risk by one third. ■

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