

Diet, Nutrition and Bowel Cancer

Researchers generally accept that a healthy diet may go some way to reducing the risk of developing bowel cancer. However, because there are many factors which increase the risk, this factsheet outlines steps you can take which may be beneficial.

Vitamins, minerals and fibre

There is increasing evidence to show diets high in a variety of vegetables, fruits and whole grains may help to reduce the risk of bowel cancer due to their active vitamin, mineral and fibre content.

Important note: it is not recommended that supplemental vitamins and minerals bought over the counter are used as a replacement for a varied and balanced diet. High levels of some vitamins may adversely affect cancer treatments. Do not take supplements unless directed by a health professional.

Foods to eat more of

Antioxidants

Antioxidants – namely carotenoids, flavonoids, selenium, folate, and vitamins C and E - may help to protect cells from damage. These are found in most fruits and vegetables. Eating a variety of brightly coloured plant foods ensures that all antioxidant vitamins are provided by the diet. Good sources are:

Carotenoids: Carrots, red peppers, tomatoes, pumpkins, spinach, kale, broccoli, watermelon, mangoes, corn

Flavonoids: Raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, onions, beans

Selenium: Brazil nuts, whole wheat, eggs, fish

Folate: Green leafy vegetables, beans, lentils, nuts, wholegrains

Vitamin C: Broccoli, cabbage, spinach, citrus fruits, red and green peppers, kiwi fruit, strawberries, tomatoes

Vitamin E: Nuts, seeds, wheatgerm, whole grains, avocados

Fibre

As well as vegetables and fruits, other plant foods are also thought to help reduce the risk of bowel cancer. This is especially true of unrefined or whole foods like potatoes in their skins, brown rice, beans, wholegrain bread and cereals.

Due to their high fibre content, whole foods move through the gut quickly. A reduction in stool (poo) transit time is an important factor in bowel cancer prevention. The shorter the time that waste is left in the colon the less likely the bowel is to be exposed to toxic chemicals, which researchers suspect contribute to an increased risk of the disease.



Some people worry that they will be uncomfortable or full of gas when they increase their fibre intake but as long as this is done gradually there should not be a problem. Drinking 1½ litres of water per day will aid digestion and help prevent constipation.

Prebiotic fibre encourages the growth of beneficial bacteria in the gut, which then boosts the immune system and helps food to be digested properly. Foods which include prebiotic fibre are onions, garlic, leeks, beans, lentils and oats. Allium compounds in garlic and onions are thought to be particularly effective at preventing bowel cancer. Probiotic bacteria found in live natural yoghurt will top up levels of beneficial gut bacteria.

Foods to cut down on

The following foods have all been linked to the development of bowel cancer. It is advisable that you try to cut down on:

Red meat: Particularly fatty and processed meat like burgers, sausages or ready meals, and meat which has been burnt or charred. The chemicals produced in cooking red meat are thought to be harmful to the gut lining.

Fat: Particularly saturated fat, the kind found in meat and dairy products, and trans-fats (which are a result of food processing) found in many pre-packed foods and baked goods such as pastries. Both may be linked to the formation of bowel polyps.

Alcohol: A high intake of any type of alcohol is thought to increase bowel cancer risk. The recommended weekly allowance is 14 units for a woman and 21 units for men. One unit is approximately half a pint of beer, half a glass of wine or one measure of spirits.

Caffeine: Tea, coffee, cola and some popular non-alcoholic bedtime drinks contain caffeine, which encourages the fluid we drink to pass quickly through our waterworks rather than circulate through the bowel.

Meal ideas

The following meal ideas are designed to be low fat and high fibre:

<p>Breakfast Porridge with added mixed seeds Muesli with dried fruit and yoghurt Baked beans on wholegrain toast</p>	<p>Main meals Bean and vegetable chilli with brown rice Grilled chicken with mixed vegetable stir fry and noodles Baked mackerel with roasted onions, garlic and fennel</p>
<p>Light meals Carrot and coriander soup with granary bread Tuna, red onion and mixed bean salad Baked sweet potato with hummus and salad</p>	<p>Desserts Baked apples with raisins and walnuts Rhubarb crumble Wholemeal carrot cake</p>

You may find the following additional factsheets helpful:

- Knowing the Symptoms and Who is at Risk
- Reducing Your Risk

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