



Eat Well, Heal Better

PAID PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

People undergoing cancer treatment can experience progressive weight loss and poor nutrition, which can, in turn, affect their treatment. "Aggressive nutritional support is an important part of all cancer therapy," says Dr. C. Joseph Bennett, Jr., board-certified radiation oncologist at the Robert Boissonneault Oncology Institute. "It improves the patient's sense of well-being and will allow the oncologist to proceed with cancer therapy without interruptions secondary to malnutrition. This may also allow the oncologist to

administer more aggressive treatment." Appetite loss can be a symptom of cancer. Some cancers, like those of the esophagus, throat, or stomach, can produce tumors that interfere with eating and digesting. Cancer also demands more energy from the body, just at the time when it makes that energy harder to come by.

"When possible, malnourished cancer patients should be identified prior to the initiation of therapy," Bennett adds, and aggressive steps should be taken to improve their food intake.

Cancer treatment itself can interfere with nutrition. Side effects of chemotherapy can include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and changes in taste leading to food avoidance. Radiation for certain cancers can affect the mouth, throat, or esophagus, making eating more difficult.

Dr. Bennett says that oncologists should pay careful attention to every patient's overall nutrition. "One must never forget that a patient's sense of well-being is also important in their participation with a treatment protocol."

Food for Thought

Much research on the relationship between diet and cancer risk has focused on studying specific foods in isolation. This approach helps avoid the confusion that can come from studying multiple foods at once when the reason for a particular result can be unclear.

But people do not live by bread (or cheeseburgers, or broccoli) alone. "Foods and beverages, as well as the nutrients and dietary constituents they contain, are consumed together, never in isolation of one another," writes Dr. Jill Reedy at the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Reedy points out that cancer cells can develop due to interactions among multiple foods. "We're taking a more holistic approach and looking at dietary patterns versus individual foods or nutrients across the lifespan," she says, "and we are developing tools that can incorporate dietary patterns to reflect this shift."

One of those tools, the Healthy Eating Index (HEI), is a collaboration between NCI and the US Department of Agriculture. In addition to describing diet quality among the US population, the HEI evaluates the quality of foods in different settings, such as fast-food restaurants, food banks, and school cafeterias.

"If we assess how well a set of foods—for example, those provided by a food bank—align with dietary guidance focused on total diet, we can then work toward improving that set of foods to minimize the risk of cancer and other health conditions," Reedy says.

117
million

Americans with one or more preventable chronic diseases (including some cancers) related to poor quality eating patterns and physical inactivity

26%

Patients receiving chemotherapy who reported a loss of appetite

2020

The year the Nutrition Facts label was updated (for the first time in more than 20 years) to reflect new scientific data on links between nutrition and certain cancers

3.5%

Cancer deaths in the US that were alcohol-related



Did You Know?

Cachexia is a condition with symptoms that include weight loss, loss of body mass, weakness, and possibly organ malfunction. It often occurs in patients with advanced cancers, but it can also be seen in patients with localized cancers. Cachexia can also occur when a patient is not getting the proper amounts of nutrients.

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