
10: REDUCING YOUR RISK OF BOWEL CANCER

While we do not fully understand the causes of bowel cancer, we do know that there are several important things you can do to reduce your risk of developing bowel cancer. These include certain lifestyle factors, such as maintaining a healthy weight, having a healthy diet, getting enough regular exercise and having regular check-ups if you find you are at a higher than average risk of developing bowel cancer.

It is believed that 66 to 75 per cent of bowel cancer cases could be prevented by eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly.

If you would like more information about reducing your risk of bowel cancer, contact the Cancer Information Service on 13 11 20.

10.1 IS BOWEL CANCER PREVENTABLE?

No cancer is completely preventable, but the chances of developing one can sometimes be greatly reduced.

10.2 A HEALTHY DIET

Food and nutrition have an important role to play in modifying the risk of developing bowel cancer.

Fruit and vegetables

The most important thing we can do to provide protection from bowel cancer is to eat five or more servings each day of fruit and vegetables. One serving of vegetables weighs about 60–90 grams, and one serving of fruit weighs about 120–140 grams.

Vegetables have been shown to provide strong protection against bowel cancer, therefore you should eat a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, especially cruciferous vegetables such as bok choy, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, chinese cabbage, collards, kohlrabi, mustard greens, swedes and turnips.

Recommendation:

Eat five or more portions per day of a variety of vegetables and fruits all year round.

Fibre

Eat plenty of fibre, especially wholegrain cereal fibres and wheat bran (also known as *poorly soluble cereal fibres*). Eating plenty of cereals is good for your general health and may also protect you against bowel cancer. Cereals contain dietary fibre and starch, important components of a healthy diet.

Cereals do not just include the commercial cereals many of us eat for breakfast. They also include wholegrain rice and pasta and wholegrain breads. Wheat bran in particular has been shown to protect against bowel cancer. You can find wheat bran in your supermarket as 'unprocessed' or 'natural' bran.

Recommendation:

Ensure your diet contains a selection of wholegrain cereal fibres and wheat bran, especially if you are at a high risk of developing bowel cancer.

Energy and fat intake

In general, Australians eat too much fat. There is evidence that a high intake of fat and obesity increase the risk of bowel cancer.

It is important to eat a low fat diet—reduce your dietary fat intake to less than 25 per cent of the energy you consume. It is equally important to eat a low calorie diet—fewer than 2,500 kilocalories (10,480 kJ) a day for men and fewer than 2,000 kilocalories (8,360 kJ) a day for women.

However, some uncommon fats may protect against bowel cancer. These are omega-3 fatty acids (found mainly in fish and fish oil).

Recommendation:

Reduce dietary fat intake to less than 25 per cent of the energy you consume.

Eat a low energy diet—fewer than 2,500 kilocalories (10,480 kJ) a day for men and fewer than 2,000 kilocalories (8,360 kJ) a day for women.

Meat

There is inconclusive evidence (evidence that doesn't lead to a clear recommendation) about the effect of a high intake of red meat and a person's risk of developing bowel cancer.

It may be important to avoid charring and heavily browning when frying or grilling meat, poultry or fish.

Dairy products and calcium

At present there are no special recommendations about dietary calcium intake and bowel cancer.

In the past, calcium was thought to offer a moderately protective effect against bowel cancer, but recent studies have shown this not to be the case.

In keeping with general healthy diet guidelines, it is recommended you eat and drink plenty of foods containing calcium (eg milk, yoghurt, low fat cheese)—ensuring an intake of between 1,000 and 1,200 mg of calcium per day.

Recommendation:

Ensure a dietary calcium intake of 1,000–1,200 mg per day.

Other factors

There are a few other things that may prove to be useful in the future. For example, in population studies, aspirin reduces people's risk of bowel cancer, but doctors aren't sure of the right dose yet, and are too worried about side effects to recommend it for everybody. Regular doses of selenium supplements, which can be obtained naturally from eating whole grains and vegetables, might turn out to be useful but currently the benefits of taking them have not been proven. It is therefore advised that vitamin and selenium supplements are not to be taken. Research is continuing to determine the benefits of these products. Evidence that antioxidant vitamins are protective is poor and beta-carotene in particular is not recommended as it may actually promote some cancer types.

Recommendation:

On the basis of available evidence, aspirin, selenium and antioxidant vitamin supplementation are not currently recommended.

10.3 A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

There is now convincing evidence that regular physical activity, especially throughout your life, can offer protection against bowel cancer. While we do not yet know exactly how much activity you need to do to reduce your risk, we do know there are many other benefits to making regular exercise a part of your daily life.

Regular physical activity reduces your risk of cardiovascular disease and helps with the management of other conditions such as osteoporosis, arthritis, non-insulin dependent diabetes and obesity.

Remember, even if you currently do little or no exercise, it is never too late to start. In fact, significant health benefits are to be gained by being moderately active most days of the week even if you have previously been inactive.

It is also wise to restrict the amount of alcohol you drink as alcohol consumption may increase your risk of developing bowel cancer. Men should have no more than four standard drinks per day and women should have no more than two standard drinks per day.



Smoking is also associated with a higher risk of developing bowel cancer. It is recommended that you don't smoke.

Recommendation:

Avoid smoking, limit alcohol consumption and be physically active to protect against bowel cancer.

**Guidelines for the prevention,
early detection and management of
colorectal cancer: *A guide for patients,
their families and friends***

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