

# Nutrition and Wellness: What Every Breast Cancer Patient and Survivor Should Know

It is important that all cancer survivors know what foods help prevent cancer in order to decrease their risk of recurrence.

Women in the United States have a one in eight chance of developing breast cancer in their lifetime. Therefore, finding ways to decrease this risk is critical. There are foods you can include in an overall healthy diet to help decrease risk of recurrence and increase survival. These foods provide an unwelcome environment for cancer cells to grow.



## Weight

In today's world, it can be very challenging to maintain a healthy weight. With the availability of fast foods, work schedules and busy lifestyles, often there is little time to prepare healthy meals or to exercise.

Over the last 10 years, the rate of obesity has skyrocketed in the U.S., from 30.5% to 42.4%. What is very concerning is that children and adolescents, with an obesity rate of 19.3%, are at high risk for future health problems: cancer, diabetes, stroke, heart disease, a decrease in the quality of life and even depression. Therefore, it is good to establish healthy eating habits for the whole family.

***I wish I could lose weight as easy as I lose my keys, pen, cell phone, my temper, and even my mind!***

Being overweight increases risk for breast cancer and recurrence. The risk is highest for post-menopausal women. The factors believed to increase this risk include:

1. When the ovaries no longer produce much estrogen, excess body fat can be used to produce more estrogen, thereby raising estrogen levels, which in turn, increases risk.
2. Excess weight can contribute to higher blood sugar levels. This means your body has to produce more insulin to control your blood sugars. An increased level of insulin in the blood is associated with an increased risk of recurrence and a decrease in survival.
3. Weight gain in the waist area is believed to increase risk more than weight in the legs or hips.

A weight loss of ½ lb. a week is a great start! This means cutting out ~250 calories per day or 1750 calories per week. Skip that morning donut or afternoon candy bar and you have done it! Any loss is beneficial.

## Physical Activity

According to the American Cancer Society, many studies over the last 20 years have consistently shown that physical activity reduces breast cancer risk.

Aim for at least 150 minutes a week (30 minute walk 5 times per week) of moderate aerobic activity or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity weekly, plus strength training at least twice a week. Moderate activity causes a slight increase in heart rate and breathing. You should be able to talk, but not sing during the activity. Try low impact exercises in the water or walking. Start slow and gradually increase the duration of your exercise. Every step counts!

## Diet! What Should I Eat?

No one eats a perfect diet. It is what we do “most of the time”, and not what we do “some of the time” that plays the biggest role in our health.

### Eat Your Vegetables and Fruits!

Vegetables and fruits, in particular, are “cancer fighting foods” because they contain “phytochemicals”. Phytochemicals are compounds produced by plants and believed to protect cells from damage that could lead to cancer. There are more than 4,000 phytochemicals found in fruits, vegetables, grains, beans and other plants. That is why we should eat a variety of foods from all the food groups!

Focus on fruits and vegetables high in vitamin C, carotenoids and cruciferous vegetables, which contain compounds that lower inflammation, enhance your immune system and decrease your risk of developing cancer.



Cruciferous vegetables or the “cabbage” family of vegetables all contain phytochemicals, vitamins, minerals and fiber that have been linked to lower cancer risks. Some have shown the ability to stop the growth of cancer cells for tumors in the breast, uterine lining (endometrium), lung, colon, liver, and cervix, according to the American Institute for Cancer Research. These foods include cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, radishes and turnips. See list below for a more complete list of these vegetables.

Lab studies show that one of the phytochemicals found in cruciferous vegetables - sulforaphane – can stimulate enzymes in the body that detoxify carcinogens before they damage cells. Two other compounds found in cruciferous vegetables -indole 3-carbinol and crambene - are also suspected of activating detoxification enzymes. Cruciferous vegetables may help to protect against cancer by reducing harmful molecules called oxygen-free radicals, which are generated by the body. In addition to reducing risk of breast cancer, a decrease in free radicals may decrease the risk of colon, lung, prostate as well as other cancers.

### Fruit and Vegetable Recommendations

1. Consume a diet high in a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans. Vegetables and fruit should account for the majority of our diet.
  - a. Try to eat 1 ½ -2 ½ cups veggies and 1-2 cups of fruit each day. If you prefer vegetables to fruit or vice versa, you may take your servings from either group as they contain similar amounts of vitamins and minerals.
  - b. Carotenoids: Apricots, asparagus, beef liver, beets, broccoli, cantaloupe, carrots, guava, kale, mangoes, mustard and collard greens, nectarines, peaches, pink grapefruit, pumpkin, squash (yellow and winter), sweet



potatoes, tangerines, tomatoes and watermelon. Carotenoids have been linked with decreasing recurrence of breast cancer.

- c. Cruciferous: Broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, bok choy, arugula, Brussels sprouts, collards, watercress and radishes
  - d. Vitamin C: Orange juice, oranges, grapefruit and grapefruit juice, kiwi, green pepper, broccoli, strawberries, Brussels sprouts, cooked cabbage, cauliflower
  - e. Other great choices: Apples, blueberries, butternut squash, corn, dark leafy greens, dried beans (pinto, navy, black, etc.), green peas, papaya, pineapple, prunes, raspberries, red peppers, raisins, spinach, turnip greens
2. Wash or scrub your vegetables and fruits (both fresh and dried) to remove harmful pesticides. Washing with water usually does not remove all the pesticides.
    - a. Remove outer leaves from lettuce and cabbage.
    - b. Soak dried fruits such as raisins, prunes, cranberries and cherries in a solution of 4 parts room temperature water and 1 part vinegar for 5-10 minutes, then rinse with water. You may also use this solution to soak raspberries, blackberries, blueberries and strawberries; you will need to handle these gently as they are fragile.
    - c. Use a solution of 1 tsp baking soda per 2 cups warm water and soak fresh fruits such as apples, nectarines, peaches and pears for 12-15 minutes. Rinse thoroughly.

## Protein

Fish, turkey, chicken and vegetarian meals are your best choices for protein. If you choose to eat red meats, always pick the leanest cuts and trim excess fat. Use lower fat cooking techniques and drain off fat.

1. Avoid processed meats or those with nitrates (hot dogs, bologna, salami, ham, pepperoni, beef jerky, summer sausages, etc.) and smoked meats. These foods are usually high in fat and sodium as well. Read labels carefully and look for those labeled “nitrate free”.
2. Eat red meat only 2-3 times/week and limit portions to 3 oz.
3. Avoid charred meat! For those of you who prefer your meat rare, the news is good. When grilling or cooking red meat, chicken, turkey or fish, do not char the outside or cook at really high temperatures. Charring and pan frying under high heat causes compounds to form which have been shown to have the ability to damage our DNA in ways that make cancer more likely. The hotter and longer meat is cooked, the more these chemicals are formed.
4. Eat more “non-meat” sources of protein: lentil burgers, beans and rice, brown rice or quinoa with chick peas, breakfast cereal with milk or yogurt, hummus, rice and beans, falafel wrap, muesli with nuts, sunflower or flax seeds, soups or stews with dried beans and peas, peanut butter on whole-grain bread, tofu stir-fried with vegetables, noodles and peanuts, yogurt with sunflower seeds or almonds.

Fish is a great source of low-fat protein (unless you bread it, deep fry and cover with tartar sauce). Some fish are high in omega-3 fatty acids and eating these has been linked to an improved breast cancer prognosis. Omega-3 fatty acids boost your immune system, which can help fight off cancer cells, decrease the production of cancer cells and growth of breast tumors. Researchers are studying the effects omega acid may have on delaying or reducing tumor development in breast and prostate cancer omega-3 fatty acids have also shown to have benefit in treating arthritis, autoimmune diseases, depression and heart disease.



## Omega-3 Fatty Acid Recommendations

It is better to get your omega-3 fatty acid from eating fish, if possible, rather than taking fish oil supplements. It's important to note that the benefit from omega-3 fatty acid corresponds only to the consumption of fish, not fish oil supplements.

These fish are higher in omega-3 fatty acids, so try to get in three to four servings of these every week: Wild salmon, Atlantic, Pacific and jack mackerel, halibut, sable fish (black cod), whitefish, Pacific sardines, bluefin tuna, Atlantic herring, rainbow and lake trout, mussels, tuna, pollock, striped bass, blue crab or Alaska king crab. Check the list below regarding mercury content of different varieties of fish.

Other sources of omega-3 fatty acids are flaxseed oil and beans such as kidney, great northern, navy, and soybeans.

### **What about mercury in fish?**

Although there is currently no research that demonstrates mercury increases the risk of cancer, we know that it is advisable, particularly for pregnant women, those who may become pregnant and children, to limit their intake of mercury.

Although the following fish are also high in omega-3, it is a good idea to limit them to 1 serving per week as they have a higher mercury levels: Monkfish, lobster, snapper, bass, mahi mahi, Spanish mackerel, halibut and canned albacore tuna.

Avoid these fish completely: King mackerel, marlin, orange roughy, shark, swordfish, tilefish and bigeye tuna.

## **Beans and Whole Grains**

Beans and whole grains, along with fruits and vegetables are great sources of fiber. The goal is to consume at least 25-35 grams of fiber per day. You can do this by reading labels to see how much fiber is in foods. Be sure to choose whole wheat pasta, breads, cereals and brown rice. Avoid processed and refined grains/flours/sugars. Below is a list of some of the foods highest in fiber.



- Nuts and Grains: All nuts, seeds, popcorn, and coconut, bran flakes and bran type cereals such as All-Bran, Bran Buds, Bran Flakes, Wheaties, Raisin Bran, Grape Nuts, Fiber One, Wheat Chex, brown rice, wild rice, whole wheat pastas, quinoa, whole wheat bread, bran muffins, rye bread, fruit or nut breads.
- Vegetables: Avocado, asparagus, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, corn, lentils, black-eyed peas, pinto, navy, garbanzo, lima, black beans, dark greens such as spinach, collard and mustard greens, green, yellow and red peppers, succotash.
- Fruits: Cherries, blackberries, dried fruits such as raisins, apricots, cherries, dates and prunes, oranges, tangerines, mandarin orange, peaches, pears, raspberries and strawberries.

## **Herbal Tea**

Drink 1 to 4 cups of green tea daily. It contains phytonutrients “polyphenols” that provide antioxidant and anticancer properties.

## **Vitamin D Levels**

Check with your physician about your vitamin D level (serum 25 (OH)-vitamin D) and possible need for a vitamin D supplement, especially in fall and winter months.

## **Alcohol**

According to the American Institute of Cancer research, alcohol of all types can increase your risk of developing cancer. The general recommendation, based on research, is to limit yourself to no more than one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men. Ask your doctor if you can drink any alcohol while in treatment.

## **Soy**

Always check with your doctor for guidance regarding soy in your diet.

Soy has remained a subject of controversy. However, research has shown that soy may actually have benefits. Moderate amounts of soy are likely safe to eat and can be part of an overall healthy diet. Soybeans are a good source of fiber, healthy oils and protein. Moderate consumption is 1 to 2 standard servings daily of whole soy foods, such as tofu, soy milk, edamame and soy nuts. Examples of a standard serving are 1/3 cup (about 3 oz.) tofu, 1 cup soy milk, 1/2 cup edamame and ¼ cup (1 oz.) soy nuts. It is recommended that women do not take soy-containing pills, powders, teas, liquid extracts or supplements containing high amounts of isoflavones.

## **Flaxseed**

Studies regarding flaxseed suggest that it may inhibit growth and metastasis of breast, prostate cancer and melanoma. It appears to lower tumor biomarkers in prostate and breast cancer. Only moderate amounts of ground flaxseeds, up to one to two tablespoons per day at most, should be eaten. Always check with your doctor before taking flaxseed. Take flaxseed one to two hours after taking any medicine.

## **Vitamins, Herbs and Minerals – Are They Safe?**

Many well-intended people recommend certain supplements, and then there are those that make a profit off our anxieties. They tell us that we cannot get what we need from our foods due to over processing, etc. The body needs small amounts of vitamins and minerals to function properly and most are found naturally in foods.

A person who eats a balanced diet usually gets plenty of vitamins and minerals. However, it can be hard to eat a balanced diet every day, so a daily multivitamin and mineral supplement may be a good idea. Always check with your doctor to make sure it is OK. It is usually best to choose a vitamin that contains no more than 100% of the daily value (DV) of vitamins and minerals. Large doses of some vitamins and minerals may make chemotherapy and radiation therapy less effective.

Herbs are found in many products, including pills, liquid extracts, teas and ointments. Many of these products are harmless and safe to use, but others can cause severe and harmful side effects. Some herbs may interfere with proven cancer treatments.

Many people believe that if they find a pill or supplement in stores, it is safe and it works. Although the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) has rules to ensure supplements contain what their labels say, they do not evaluate them for safety or possible side effects on the body. Moreover, the FDA cannot pull a dietary supplement or herbal product from the market unless they have proof that the product is unsafe.

This means there is no sure way to know if a supplement is safe or how it will affect you. Research the supplement, but look for a reliable source for your information. Information from the American Institute of Cancer research, medical centers as well as medical journals are generally a good place to start. If your research sends you to a website that is selling a product, be cautious. It is necessary to tell your doctor about any over-the-counter products or supplements you are using or are thinking about using. Take the bottle(s) to your doctor to talk about the dose and be sure that they will not interfere with your health or your treatment.

Remember, although there are some risk factors we cannot change, there are many  
WE CAN control! Take good care of YOU!



Authored by a Community Health Network registered dietitian.  
Learn more at [eCommunity.com/survivorship](https://eCommunity.com/survivorship)