

The Anti-Cancer Diet

Cancer Nutrition Tips and Cancer-Fighting Foods

Whether you have a history of cancer in your family, or are currently battling the disease, lifestyle factors, including your diet, can make a huge difference in helping you fight off cancer. Some foods actually increase your risk of cancer, while others support your body and strengthen your immune system. By making smart food choices, you can protect your health, feel better, and boost your ability to fight off cancer and other disease.

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What you need to know about cancer and diet

Not all health problems are avoidable, but you have more control over your health than you may think. Research shows that a large percentage of cancer-related deaths—maybe even the majority—are directly linked to lifestyle choices such as smoking, drinking, a lack of exercise, and an unhealthy diet. Avoiding cigarettes, limiting alcohol, and getting regular exercise are a great start to an anti-cancer lifestyle. But to best support your health, you also need to look at your eating habits.

What you eat—and don't eat—has a powerful effect on your health, including your risk of cancer. Without knowing it, you may be eating many foods that fuel cancer, while neglecting the powerful foods and nutrients that can protect you. If you change your diet and behaviors, you can minimize your risk of disease and possibly even stop cancer in its tracks.

Cancer prevention diet tip #1: Focus on plant-based foods

Why plant-based foods are cancer-fighting powerhouses

It comes down to this: Plants have less fat, more fiber, and more cancer-fighting nutrients. These three elements work together to support your immune system and help your body fight off cancer.

The best diet for preventing or fighting cancer is a predominantly plant-based diet that includes a variety of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. A plant-based diet means eating mostly foods that come from plants: vegetables, fruits, nuts, grains, and beans.

The less processed these foods are—the less they've been cooked, peeled, mixed with other ingredients, stripped of their nutrients, or otherwise altered from the way they came out of the ground—the better.

There are many ways to add plant-based foods to your diet. A nice visual reminder is to aim for a plate of food that is filled at least two-thirds with whole grains, vegetables, beans, or fruit. Dairy products, fish, and meat should take up no more than a third of the plate. Keep in mind that you don't need to go completely vegetarian. Instead, focus on adding "whole" foods, which are foods close to their original form. Just as important, try to minimize or reduce the amount of processed foods you

eat. Eat an apple instead of drinking a glass of apple juice, for example. Or enjoy a bowl of oatmeal with raisins instead of an oatmeal raisin cookie.

Simple tips for getting more plant-based foods in your diet

- **Breakfast:** Add fruit and a few seeds or nuts to your whole grain breakfast cereal (such as oatmeal).
- **Lunch:** Eat a big salad filled with your favorite beans and peas or other combo of veggies. Always order lettuce and tomato (plus any other veggies you can) on your sandwiches. Order whole grain bread for your sandwiches. Have a side of veggies like cut up carrots, sauerkraut, or a piece of fruit.
- **Snacks:** Fresh fruit and vegetables. Grab an apple or banana on your way out the door. Raw veggies such as carrots, celery, cucumbers, jicama, peppers, etc. are great with a low-fat dip such as hummus. Keep trail mix made with nuts, seeds, and a little dried fruit on hand.
- **Dinner:** Add fresh or frozen veggies to your favorite pasta sauce or rice dish. Top a baked potato with broccoli and yogurt, sautéed veggies, or with salsa. Replace creamy pasta sauces, with sautéed vegetables or tomato sauce made with healthy olive oil.
- **Dessert:** Choose fruit instead of a richer dessert. Or a single square of dark chocolate.

Buy organic or local produce, if possible

Some pesticides found in commercially-grown produce are also suspected carcinogens. [Organic foods](#) are free of these pesticides, and locally grown produce is less likely to have been treated with chemicals to prevent spoilage.

Cancer prevention diet tip #2: Bulk up on fiber

Another benefit of eating plant-based foods is that it will also increase your fiber intake. Fiber, also called roughage or bulk, is the part of plants (grains, fruits, and vegetables) that your body can't digest. Fiber plays a key role in keeping your digestive system clean and healthy. It helps keep food moving through your digestive tract, and it also moves cancer-causing compounds out before they can create harm.

Fiber is found in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. In general, the more natural and unprocessed the food, the higher it is in fiber. There is no fiber in meat, dairy, sugar, or "white" foods like white bread, white rice, and pastries.

Simple ways to add more fiber to your diet:

- Use brown rice instead of white rice
- Substitute whole-grain bread for white bread
- Choose a bran muffin over a croissant or pastry
- Snack on popcorn instead of potato chips
- Eat fresh fruit such as a pear, a banana, or an apple (with the skin)
- Have a baked potato, including the skin, instead of mashed potatoes
- Enjoy fresh carrots, celery, or bell peppers with a hummus or salsa, instead of chips and a sour cream dip
- Use beans instead of ground meat in chili, casseroles, tacos, and even burgers (bean burgers can taste great)

High-fiber, cancer-fighting foods	
Whole grains	whole-wheat pasta, raisin bran, barley, oatmeal, oat bran muffins, popcorn, brown rice, whole-grain or whole-wheat bread
Fruit	raspberries, apples, pears, strawberries, bananas, blackberries, blueberries, mango, apricots, citrus fruits, dried fruit, prunes, raisins
Legumes	lentils, black beans, split peas, lima beans, baked beans, kidney beans, pinto, chick peas, navy beans, black-eyed peas
Vegetables	broccoli, spinach, dark green leafy vegetables, peas, artichokes, corn, carrots, tomatoes, Brussels sprouts, potatoes

Cancer prevention diet tip #3: Cut down on meat

Research shows that vegetarians are about fifty percent less likely to develop cancer than those who eat meat. So what's the link between meat and cancer risk? First, meat lacks fiber and other nutrients that have been shown to have cancer-protective properties. What it does have in abundance, however, is fat—often very high levels of saturated fat. High-fat diets have been linked to higher rates of cancer. And saturated fat is particularly dangerous. Finally, depending on how it is prepared, meat can develop carcinogenic compounds.

Making better meat and protein choices

You don't need to cut out meat completely and become a vegetarian. But most people consume far more meat than is healthy. You can cut down your cancer risk substantially by reducing the amount of animal-based products you eat and by choosing healthier meats.

- **Keep meat to a minimum.** Try to keep the total amount of meat in your diet to no more than fifteen percent of your total calories. Ten percent is even better.
- **Eat red meat only occasionally.** Red meat is high in saturated fat, so eat it sparingly.
- **Reduce the portion size of meat in each meal.** The portion should be able to fit in the palm of your hand.
- **Use meat as a flavoring or a side, not the entrée.** You can use a little bit of meat to add flavor or texture to your food, rather than using it as the main element.
- **Add beans** and other plant-based protein sources to your meals.
- **Choose leaner meats**, such as fish, chicken, or turkey. If possible, buy organic.
- **Avoid processed meats** such as hotdogs, sausage, deli meats, and salami.

Cancer prevention diet tip #4: Choose your fats wisely

A major benefit of cutting down on the amount of meat you eat is that you will automatically cut out a lot of unhealthy fat. Eating a diet high in fat increases your risk for many types of cancer. But cutting out fat entirely isn't the answer, either. In fact, some types of fat may actually protect against cancer. The trick is to choose your fats wisely and eat them in moderation.

- **Fats that increase cancer risk** – The two most damaging fats are saturated fats and trans fats. Saturated fats are found mainly in animal products such as red meat, whole milk dairy products, and eggs. Trans fats, also called partially hydrogenated oils, are created by adding

hydrogen to liquid vegetable oils to make them more solid and less likely to spoil—which is very good for food manufacturers, and very bad for you.

- **Fats that decrease cancer risk** – The best fats are unsaturated fats, which come from plant sources and are liquid at room temperature. Primary sources include olive oil, canola oil, nuts, and avocados. Also focus on omega-3 fatty acids, which fight inflammation and support brain and heart health. Good sources include salmon, tuna, and flaxseeds.

Tips for choosing cancer-fighting fats and avoiding the bad

- **Reduce your consumption of red meat, whole milk, butter, and eggs**, as these are the primary source of saturated fats.
- **Cook with olive oil instead of regular vegetable oil.** Canola oil is another good choice, especially for baking.
- **Check the ingredient list on food labels** and avoid anything with hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils, which are usually found in stick margarines, shortenings, salad dressings, and other packaged foods.
- **Trim the fat off of meat** when you do eat it, and avoid eating the skin of the chicken.
- **Choose nonfat dairy products** and eggs that have been fortified with omega-3 fatty acids.
- **Add nuts and seeds** to cereal, salads, soups, or other dishes. Good choices include walnuts, almonds, pumpkin seeds, hazelnuts, pecans, and sesame seeds.
- **Use flaxseed oil** in smoothies, salad dressings, or mixed in snacks such as applesauce. But do not cook with flaxseed oil, as it loses its protective properties when heated.
- **Limit fast food, fried foods, and packaged foods**, which tend to be high in trans fats. This includes foods like potato chips, cookies, crackers, French fries, and doughnuts.
- **Eat fish once or twice a week.** Good choices include wild salmon, sardines, herring, and black cod. But be conscious of mercury, a contaminant found in many types of fish.

Cancer prevention diet tip #5: Choose cancer-fighting foods

Your immune system keeps you healthy by fighting off unwanted invaders in your system, including cancer cells. There are many things you can eat to maximize the strength of your immune system, as well as many cancer-fighting foods. But keep in mind that there is no single miracle food or ingredient that will protect you against cancer. Eating a colorful variety gives you the best protection.

- **Boost your antioxidants.** Antioxidants are powerful vitamins that protect against cancer and help the cells in your body function optimally. Fruits and vegetables are the best sources of antioxidants such as beta-carotene, vitamin C, vitamin E, and selenium.
- **Eat a wide range of brightly colored fruits and vegetables.** Colorful fruits and vegetables are rich in phytochemicals, a potent disease-fighting and immune-boosting nutrient. The greater the variety of colors that you include, the more you will benefit, since different colors are rich in different phytochemicals.
- **Flavor with immune-boosting spices and foods.** Garlic, ginger, and curry powder not only add flavor, but they add a cancer-fighting punch of valuable nutrients. Other good choices include turmeric, basil, rosemary, and coriander. Use them in soups, salads, casseroles, or any other dish.
- **Drink plenty of water.** Water is essential to all bodily processes. It stimulates the immune system, removes waste and toxins, and transports nutrients to all of your organs.

Cancer prevention diet tip #6: Prepare your food in healthy ways

Choosing healthy food is not the only important factor. It also matters how you prepare and store your food. The way you cook your food can either help or hurt your anti-cancer efforts.

Preserving the cancer-fighting benefits of vegetables

Here are a few tips that will help you get the most benefits from eating all those great cancer-fighting vegetables:

- **Eat at least some raw fruits and vegetables.** These have the highest amounts of vitamins and minerals, although cooking some vegetables can make the vitamins more available for our body to use.
- **When cooking vegetables, steam until just tender using a small amount of water.** This preserves more of the vitamins. Overcooking vegetables removes many of the vitamins and minerals. If you do boil vegetables, use the cooking water in a soup or another dish to ensure you're getting all the vitamins.
- **Wash all fruits and vegetables.** Use a vegetable brush for washing. Washing does not eliminate all pesticide residue, but will reduce it. Choose organic produce if possible, grown without the use of pesticides.

Cooking and carcinogens

Carcinogens are cancer-causing substances found in food. Carcinogens can form during the cooking or preserving process—mostly in relation to meat—and as foods start to spoil. Examples of foods that have carcinogens are cured, dried, and preserved meats (e.g. bacon, sausage, beef jerky); burned or charred meats; smoked foods; and foods that have become moldy. Here are some ways reduce your exposure to carcinogens:

The 5 Worst Foods to Grill

- Chicken breast, skinless, boneless, grilled, well done
- Steak, grilled, well done
- Pork, barbecued
- Salmon, grilled with skin
- Hamburger, grilled, well done

Source: *Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine*

- **Do not cook oils on high heat.** Low-heat cooking or baking (less than 240 degrees) prevents oils or fats from turning carcinogenic. Instead of deep-frying, pan-frying, and sautéing, opt for healthier methods such as baking, boiling, steaming, or broiling.
- **Go easy on the barbecue.** Burning or charring meats creates carcinogenic substances. If you do choose to barbecue, don't overcook the meat and be sure to cook at the proper temperature (not too hot).
- **Store oils in a cool dark place in airtight containers,** as they quickly become rancid when exposed to heat, light, and air.
- **Choose fresh meats** instead of cured, dried, preserved, or smoked meats.
- **Avoid foods that look or smell moldy,** as they likely contain aflatoxin, a strong carcinogen. Aflatoxin is most commonly found on moldy peanuts. Nuts will stay fresh longer if kept in the refrigerator or freezer.
- **Be careful what you put in the microwave.** Use waxed paper rather than plastic wrap to cover your food in the microwave. And always use microwave-safe containers.