



Nutrition and Cancer



Basic description

If Americans maintained a healthy weight, ate a balanced diet that emphasized plant foods, and engaged in regular physical activity, as many as one-third of all cancer deaths in the United States could be prevented. Factors that affect cancer risk may include types of foods, how food is prepared, portion size, food variety, and overall balance of the diet. For the majority of Americans who do not use tobacco, dietary choices and physical activity are the most important modifiable determinants of cancer risk.

Cancers affected

Many scientific studies have demonstrated that dietary habits affect the risk of certain cancers. Diets high in vegetables and fruits can help reduce the risk of lung, mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophageal, stomach, and colorectal cancers. At the same time, diets high in red and processed meats have been linked with a higher risk of certain cancers, especially colorectal cancers.

Overweight and obesity are associated with increased risk for cancers of the breast (in post-menopausal women), colon and rectum, endometrium, kidney, pancreas, and esophagus. Evidence shows that overweight and obesity may also increase the risk for cancers of the gallbladder, liver, cervix, and ovary, as well as non-Hodgkin lymphoma, multiple myeloma, and aggressive prostate cancer.

Alcohol consumption is an established cause of cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, liver, colon, rectum, and female breast. There is also evidence linking alcohol use to pancreatic cancer. Alcohol consumption interacts with tobacco use to increase the risk of cancers of the mouth, larynx, and esophagus considerably more than the effect of either drinking or smoking alone.

Opportunities for risk reduction

Although no diet can guarantee full protection against any disease, the best opportunity for Americans to reduce their risk of cancer is by following these important guidelines:

Achieve and maintain a healthy weight throughout life.

- Be as lean as possible throughout life without being underweight.
- Avoid excess weight gain at all ages. For those who are currently overweight or obese, losing even a small amount of weight has health benefits and is a good place to start.
- Engage in regular physical activity and limit consumption of high-calorie foods and beverages as key strategies for maintaining a healthy weight.

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Adopt a physically active lifestyle.

- Adults: Engage in at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes (1 hour and 15 minutes) of vigorous-intensity activity each week, or an equivalent combination, preferably spread throughout the week.
- Children and adolescents: Engage in at least 1 hour of moderate- or vigorous-intensity activity each day, with vigorous-intensity activity occurring at least 3 days each week.
- Limit sedentary behavior such as sitting, lying down, watching television, or other forms of screen-based entertainment.
- Doing some physical activity above usual activities, no matter what one's level of activity, can have many health benefits.

Consume a healthy diet, with an emphasis on plant foods.

- Choose foods and beverages in amounts that help achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- Limit consumption of processed meats and red meats.
- Eat at least 2½ cups of vegetables and fruits each day.
- Choose whole grains instead of refined-grain products.

If you drink alcoholic beverages, limit consumption.

- Drink no more than 1 drink per day for women and 2 per day for men.

Bottom line

Physical activity and healthy eating habits, along with other factors, could reduce cancer mortality in the United States by as much as one-third. Cancer risk can be reduced by getting to and staying at a healthy weight; adopting an overall dietary pattern that emphasizes plant foods (vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans); being physically active on a regular basis; and limiting alcohol consumption.

The ability to make healthy choices is often affected by factors within the environments in which people live, work, learn, and play. Public, private, and community organizations should work to create social and physical environments that support the adoption and maintenance of healthy nutrition and physical activity behaviors through:

- Increased access to affordable, healthy foods in schools, worksites, and communities
- Decreased access to and marketing of foods and beverages of low nutritional value, particularly to youth
- Provision of safe, enjoyable, and accessible environments for physical activity in schools and worksites, and for transportation and recreation in communities