Nutritional Advice for Cancer Survivors

By Holly Mills, Registered Dietitian Nutritionist, MS, RDN, CSO

June is recognized as National Cancer Survivor Month. This month provides an opportunity to honor cancer survivors and raise awareness about living as a cancer survivor.

Someone is considered a cancer survivor from diagnosis through the remainder of life. This includes both people living with cancer and those who are cancer-free and in remission. Cancer survivors often face increased physical, mental, and financial challenges from their diagnosis and treatment. They also have an increased risk for recurrence of the same cancer as well as other cancers and medical conditions. As people with cancer live longer, more research on this population is occurring including research on nutrition and physical activity.

The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) encourages cancer survivors to follow the general advice recommended for cancer prevention:

1. Be a healthy weight. Keep body weight within the healthy range and avoid weight gain in adult life. For those who are overweight or obese, losing even a small amount of weight has health benefits and is a good place to start.
2. Be physically active. Get at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity or 75-150 minutes of vigorous intensity activity each week (or a combination of these), preferably spread throughout the week. Limit sedentary behavior such as sitting, lying down, watching TV and other forms of screen-based entertainment. Be physically active as part of everyday life- move more and sit less.
3. Eat a diet rich in whole grains, vegetables, fruits and beans. Make at least half of all grains eaten whole grains like whole wheat bread, oats, brown rice, or quinoa. Consume at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Include a variety of beans and lentils in your meals, they are great sources of fiber and plant-based protein.
4. Limit consumption of “fast foods” and other processed foods high in fat, starches, or sugars. Limiting these foods helps control caloric intake and assist with weight management.
5. Limit consumption of red and processed meat. If you eat red meat, limit consumption to 3 servings per week (total of 12-18 oz. or less a week). Red meat includes beef, pork, and lamb. Eat little, if any, processed meat. Processed meat refers to meats preserved by smoking, curing, salting or by the addition of preservatives such as ham, bacon, pastrami, salami, hot dogs, and sausage. There is strong scientific evidence that eating high amounts of red and processed meat increases the risk of colorectal cancer.
6. Limit consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks. Choose mostly water and unsweetened beverages. Try alternatives to sugar-sweetened beverages like water or tea infused with fresh fruit, lemon, or cucumber slices. Dilute 100% juice with ½ cup of water or sparkling water.
7. Limit alcohol consumption. For cancer prevention, it’s best not to drink alcohol. If consumed at all, limit alcoholic drinks to two for men and one for women daily. One alcohol drink is equal to 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.

8. Do not rely on supplements for cancer prevention. Research does not support taking supplements for cancer prevention. Aim to meet nutritional needs through diet alone. Some individuals may benefit from taking vitamin/mineral supplements for specific health reasons. It is best to speak with a healthcare provider to discuss your specific needs before taking vitamin/mineral supplements.

9. Following these recommendations is likely to reduce intakes of salt, sugar, saturated and trans-fat, which together will help prevent other medical conditions like diabetes and heart disease. Not smoking and avoiding other exposure to tobacco and excess sun are also important in reducing cancer risk.

References:
- American Institute for Cancer Research
- American Cancer Society Guideline for Diet and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention

Honoring Cancer Survivor Month

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