Applying evidence to our daily lives

There is no ‘food prescription’ for exactly what you should eat, or how much of it, if you want to reduce your cancer risk. But as the evidence grows, we can make recommendations about the balance of foods to aim for.

Aim for a healthy balanced diet that is:
• high in fibre, fruit and vegetables
• low in red and processed meat, saturated fat and salt.

Eating plenty of fibre
• Boost your fibre intake by eating lots of fruit and vegetables, including pulses.
• Try eating wholegrain starchy foods such as wholemeal bread and pasta, wholegrain cereals and brown rice.

Cutting down on saturated fat, red and processed meat
• Choosing fish rather than red meat will help you cut down on saturated fat.
• Choose low-fat options and limit the oil or butter you add during cooking.

Cutting down on salt
• Try to use less salt when cooking. And taste your food at the table before adding salt.
• Also remember that ready-prepared meals are often high in salt, so check the labels before buying.

Getting your five-a-day
• Try to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day.
• Choose a balance of different-coloured vegetables and fruit as these are likely to contain a variety of nutrients.
• It does not matter if they are tinned, dried or fresh, they still count towards your daily portions.

What counts as a portion?
A portion of fruit or vegetables is an 80g serving, for example:
• a medium-sized apple or other similar sized fruit
• a banana
• two satsumas or other similar sized fruit
• three heaped tablespoons of cooked vegetables such as carrots, peas or broccoli
• a cereal bowl’s worth of salad.

Lentils, beans and other pulses only count towards one of your daily portions as they do not contain as many nutrients as other fruits and vegetables. Similarly a 150ml glass of fruit juice or smoothie can only be counted as one portion each day as they are high in sugar and low in fibre.

Further information
About food and cancer
For more about healthy eating and the science behind our messages visit www.cancerresearchuk.org/health

For more about nutrition, food labelling and a healthy diet visit the Food Standards Agency website www.eatwell.gov.uk

About cancer
For information about living with cancer visit www.cancerhelp.org.uk

If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our information nurses on freephone 0808 8004040.

Order more leaflets
You can order our full range of leaflets free online at www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets

Support Cancer Research UK
If you would like to support our work please call 020 7121 6699 or visit www.cancerresearchuk.org

Together we will beat cancer

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Registered Charity Number 1089464.

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In countries like the UK up to three in 10 cancer deaths are linked to unhealthy diets.

Choosing healthy options does not have to be difficult or expensive and can make a big difference to your chances of developing cancer.

In this leaflet you can find out:
- what research tells us about the links between food and cancer
- about food myths and controversies
- our recommendations for a healthy, balanced diet that can help reduce your cancer risk.

There are more than 200 types of cancer, so unravelling the effects of different foods and nutrients on cancer risk is very complicated. In recent years many strands of evidence about diet and cancer have been coming together.

Fibre reduces bowel cancer risk
Much research has shown that bowel cancer is less common in people who eat lots of fibre.

One way fibre could protect against bowel cancer is by increasing the size of stools, reducing the time they spend in the bowel and diluting their contents. All of these things make it harder for cancer to develop.

Fruit and vegetables could protect against cancer
Research has shown that eating plenty of fruit and vegetables can protect against some cancers. The evidence is strongest for cancers of the mouth, gullet (oesophagus), stomach and lung.

Fruit and vegetables contain a wide variety of nutrients and are high in fibre. Scientists are working to find out about which of these nutrients protect against cancer. So far they are fairly sure that vitamins A and C, and folate (one of the B vitamins) play an important role in protecting against cancer.

Red and processed meat can increase cancer risk
Bowel cancer is more common in people who eat lots of red and processed meat. Red meat includes all fresh, minced and frozen beef, pork, lamb or veal. Processed meats include bacon, ham, salami, sausages, spam, corned beef, black pudding, pâté and tinned/canned meat.

Scientists think chemicals in red and processed meat are involved in increasing cancer risk. Some chemicals are a natural part of the meat, and others are made when the meat is cooked at high temperatures, such as on a barbeque.

Food and cancer in the headlines
Many stories about food and cancer make the headlines. But often the evidence in these areas is still unfolding.

You might have seen anything from broccoli to pomegranates named as the latest ‘superfood’, while coffee and sweeteners have both been billed as causes of cancer.

These stories are sometimes based on a single study which disagrees with the weight of evidence. Overall, scientists do not think that either broccoli or pomegranates alone will prevent cancer. And the weight of evidence does not show that coffee or sweeteners cause cancer. While one study may have found a link, many others will have found no such link.

You may have seen stories about the health benefits of vitamin supplements. Research has shown that vitamin supplements do not have the same health benefits as vitamins in fruit and vegetables. And in some cases they may even increase your cancer risk.