

Avoid colon cancer

As we focus on colorectal cancers in the month of March, three critical truths need to be strongly emphasised:

First, colon cancer is very common accounting for about 20 per cent of all cancers. Second, colon cancer is a deadly cancer as only breast cancer and prostate cancer cause more cancer deaths than colon cancer. Third, colon cancer is very preventable. Sadly, very little is said about the primary prevention of this disastrous condition. Our health authorities continue to focus most of their energies on invasive tests for early detection and on expensive treatments. These do have their place but we continue to put the cart before the horse.

What Causes Colorectal Cancer?

Health experts sometimes claim that 'we do not know what causes cancer', but that is certainly not true in the case of colorectal cancer. Colorectal cancer develops from changes in the cells lining the walls of the colon. The main factors that initiate these changes are consumption of cooked red meat, high intake of refined carbohydrates, poor vitamin and mineral intake, alcohol consumption, smoking, bile acids and faecal mutagens (cancer-causing chemicals in stool).

Although age, genetics, family history and other medical conditions like diabetes and inflammatory bowel disease may increase one's risk, we can control the many other major risk factors.

Dietary Risk Factors

Meat: Colorectal cancer occurs more frequently with diets low in fruits, vegetables, vegetable protein, and fibre. Diets containing overcooked or burnt meat or fish e.g. barbecuing, frying or jerking increases the risk. People who eat fried, well-cooked red meat more than once per week have twice the risk of colorectal cancers compared to those who eat lightly cooked red meat less frequently.

Sodium nitrate: This is a preservative that food manufacturers add to almost all packaged meat products such as bacon, breakfast sausages, picnic hams, hot dogs, salami, bologna and many others. It creates in the body dangerous cancer causing substances called nitrosamines. Avoid foods containing sodium nitrate as a part of your colorectal cancer prevention plan.

Low fibre: High-fibre foods (vegetables, fruit, nuts, whole grain, tubers) on the other hand, lower the risk of colorectal cancer. Fibre shortens the intestinal transit time and reduces the exposure of the colorectal lining to carcinogens within the stool. Constipation is very bad for colon health.

High fat intake: A diet high in saturated animal fat, particularly dairy products and meat, increases colorectal cancer risk. The digestion of fats requires bile acids that irritate and damage the cells lining the colon. These bile acids many cause abnormal growth of these cells and an increased risk of colorectal cancer.

Folic acid: Low folic acid intake, especially when combined with alcohol consumption and a low-protein diet, increases colorectal cancer risk. Dietary foliate helps the repair of damaged DNA and a high folic acid intake either from the diet (green leafy vegetables) or from supplements may protect against colorectal cancer.

Selenium: Selenium is an important antioxidant and low levels of dietary selenium are linked to an increase in colorectal tumours. Selenium supplementation improved this risk.

Iron: Iron overload is associated with the development of colorectal polyps and increases the risk of cancer. Curcumin, a popular spice, is an iron chelator (it binds excess iron) and is one of the more successful cancer-preventive nutrients under investigation.

Phyto-nutrients: Many plants contain compounds called phyto-nutrients that have anti-cancer properties. Examples of these are the polyphenols in green tea, the isoflavones in soy, lycopene in tomatoes and Indole-3-carbinol found in broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, kale and turnips. Indole-3-carbinol is being studied by The National Institutes of Health in the US as a possible cancer preventive agent.

Vitamin D: For decades research has shown a very strong relationship between the levels of vitamin D in the blood and the risk of colorectal cancer. The higher the vitamin D level, the lower the risk of colorectal cancer. The research also shows that regular sun exposure and vitamin D3 supplements are the most effective ways to elevate vitamin D levels in your blood.

Obesity: Maintaining a normal body weight and avoiding abdominal obesity also play important roles in preventing colorectal cancer.

Exercise: Medical research indicates that regular exercise can decrease colon cancer risk by up to 40 per cent. The longer waste sits in the colon or rectum, the longer the cells lining the colon wall are exposed to toxic substances in the stool. Exercise gets your body moving and stimulates peristalsis, a wave-like muscular contraction that helps push waste through your colon. Exercise also helps to reduce the incidence of other risk factors for colon cancer, like obesity and diabetes.