

## **Nutritional Insights for Cancer Patients**

Nutrition can have a vital role in supporting health and well-being during and after cancer treatment. It is important to recognize, however, that nutritional needs will vary significantly from person to person, based on the type and stage of cancer, as well as other individual circumstances such as cancer treatment, previous medical problems, food preferences, and other issues.

To appropriately consider nutritional guidelines, people with cancer must discuss dietary guidelines and nutritional supplementation with their healthcare team, and gather needed information. The healthcare team would include an experienced nutritionist or dietitian and oncologist, and others such as primary care physician, integrative medicine practitioner, nurse, psychologist, etc. Then, careful consideration needs to be given to the role they want nutrition to have and the guidelines that they will then follow.

**Integrative Nutrition and Medicine** – The approach that is promoted in integrative medicine is to maximize health and well-being by exploring and developing natural approaches that support body, mind and spirit. In this context, nutrition plays a central role, as other approaches do including physical fitness (from exercise, yoga, etc.), stress management (visualization, massage, etc.), consideration of complementary cancer therapies and others. The challenge for each individual and their healthcare team is to develop an integrative program that meets their needs and promotes healing.

Consideration of integrative nutrition guidelines includes standard approaches discussed below and described in “Eating Well, Staying Well During and After Cancer” by the American Cancer Society, but often goes further to consider other issues. Some examples of these include: (a) a focus on the maximal therapeutic potential of diet by increasing servings of foods that contain omega 3 fatty acids (for anti-inflammatory and other anti-cancer effects), soy isoflavones (for prostate and other non-estrogen-related cancers), and inclusion of numerous other phytonutrients found in vegetables, whole grains, fruits, legumes, teas, etc. – we are beginning to understand the mechanisms by which many phytonutrients may be beneficial; (b) minimizing or avoiding foods that may add to the body’s “stress” – these include refined sugars, alcohol, caffeine, saturated fat and others; (c) the inclusion of high or highest quality foods – this would include locally grown, farmers’ market and/or organic foods that would likely have higher nutritional content and less exposure to chemicals and other environmental residues that may impact susceptible people; and (d) the targeted use of dietary or nutritional supplements to complement a healthy or optimal diet or provide a specific therapeutic effect – a discussion of supplements is beyond the scope of this article.

**Healthy Proteins, Carbohydrates and Fats** – It is important that the foundation of a diet be healthy when someone has been given a cancer diagnosis. Therefore a nourishing

diet would include healthy proteins, fats, and carbohydrates as much as possible. Although individual circumstances and preferences will determine specific guidelines, the following is a brief description:

- **Healthy Proteins** – include both non-animal sources such as beans, legumes and bean products such as tofu or tempeh (if well tolerated and appropriate), as well as animal products such as fish, poultry, some low-fat dairy products (if tolerated) and occasionally lean meat.
- **Healthy Carbohydrates** – complex carbohydrates are emphasized, such as greens, salads and other low carbohydrate vegetables, starchy vegetables and whole grains. Simple carbohydrates (sugars) and refined carbohydrates (white flour products – breads, crackers, cookies, etc.) should be limited or avoided. Fruit should be the main dessert.
- **Healthy Fats** – healthy fats should be naturally present in whole foods and include monounsaturated fats, such as nuts and seeds, and avocado, and omega 3 fats found in fish, flax seeds/oil, soy products, dark green leafy vegetables and nuts. Saturated fats should be limited and trans fats avoided.

In addition, healthy snacks as well as teas, seasonings and herbs can be very helpful. Healthy snacks would include vegetable sticks such as carrot, cucumber and celery (by themselves or with a healthy dip or spread such as a nut butter, hummus or guacamole); nuts and seeds; fruit; avocado; and others such as popcorn, rice cakes or whole grain crackers, and yogurt or cheese (preferably organic).

**Individualizing and Integrating a Program** – It is essential to individualize guidelines and work with experienced practitioners who can address important issues that are inevitably present. One common issue to address is changes in weight – either weight loss or weight gain. For others there may be symptoms present that will influence dietary guidelines such as poor appetite, stomach and intestinal symptoms or fatigue. Diets can be specifically developed to: (a) help with weight gain or loss by targeting calorie-dense, nutrient-dense or other food patterns; (b) focus on more easily digested foods and smaller, more frequent meals; (c) insure adequate protein intake to maintain muscle mass; and (d) find healthy foods that are also preferred and enjoyed by the individual.

Developing and evolving a program can take some time. With a cancer survivor who has completed treatment, this is a good time to focus on health and well-being. A program can develop over 2-4 months and then be reevaluated every 2-3 months. For others with more urgent needs or ongoing treatment, they need to do the best that they can do with developing a program, taking into account everything that is happening.

It is important to maximize health and well-being when someone has had a diagnosis of cancer. While this may feel challenging, it is also an opportunity that is often not as difficult as is imagined and one that can have significant benefits even if just tried for a period of time. The goal is to target achievable and desirable modifications that produce the best effects. A healthy diet is an important foundation and can have an even greater impact when combined with targeted supplements, physical fitness and stress management. It is also important, however, to find the people and programs that have the understanding and commitment to provide the best information and services that an individual is seeking.

**Editor's Note:** Joel S. Edman, DSc, FACN, CNS is the Director of Integrative Nutrition at the Jefferson Myrna Brind Center of Integrative Medicine, and a Clinical Assistant Professor at Thomas Jefferson University and Hospital, Philadelphia, PA. Dr. Edman provides individual and small group nutritional counseling for people with cancer, and frequently lectures about cancer in the community.