Can Cancer Be Prevented?
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Spring is the perfect time to watch for new buds and new growth, but not just our daffodil and tulip bulbs. April is National Cancer Control Month and the perfect opportunity to take stock of what cancer may be growing and budding in the fertile fields of your body.

What is cancer? Normal body cells like skin cells or liver cells grow and reproduce in a pre-determined way, helping children grow into adults, or repairing injuries. When healthy cells get damaged, they die. But cancer cells are abnormal and they don’t die when they get damaged. Instead they grow and reproduce more damaged cells, killer cells that invade and destroy healthy tissues. They may form tumors or they can circulate through the blood and travel to other tissues until they find the perfect spot to grow.

Today, millions of people are living with cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates that half of all men and 1/3 of all women in the US will develop cancer in their lifetimes. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Coos and Curry county cancer rates are higher than the US rates, particularly liver, skin, thyroid and deadly pancreatic cancer. Of the 36 counties in Oregon, 6 counties have annual cancer death rates higher than national rates. Two of those counties are Coos and Curry.

Cancer and diet High fat diets have been linked to many cancers, particularly prostate (especially high fat dairy products), breast, colon, rectal and lung cancers. Saturated fats, found in animal products, are more indicated than unsaturated fats found in plant foods. Diets low in fiber and high in processed cured meats like bacon, ham and hot dogs increase risk for colorectal cancers. Low fiber diets are also low in fruits, vegetables and whole grains which contain powerful antioxidants that fight free radical tissue damage. Less than1/3 of Americans consume the daily recommendation for fruits and vegetables. In addition, three cancers center around an excess of body fat associated with poor diet and inactivity: uterine, breast and colorectal.

What can you do? The good news is that many types of cancer can be avoided or reduced by changing your lifestyle. Almost all cancers (80-90%) are caused by environmental factors and 30-40% of these can be linked directly to diet. Another 30% are linked to tobacco use with only small percentages (2-5%) related to chemical pollution, radiation and alcohol. You already know how to lower your risk for cancer: consume a diet high in fruits, vegetables and whole grains (which are all high in fiber and nutrients), and low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, sodium and alcohol. It may not surprise you to learn that vegetarian diets have been shown to have a statistically significant protection for overall cancer incidence. Maybe getting specific will give you a clear path to getting started.
1. Start your day with a healthy breakfast. Those who consume breakfast are more likely to be a healthy body weight. For a hot cereal, try steel cut oats, amaranth porridge or quinoa flakes. Cold cereals should be 100% whole grain with 5 or more grams of fiber, low in sugar and low in salt. Add fresh, frozen or dried berries for antioxidants and sweetness.
2. Flavonoids are antioxidants that inhibit cancer cell and tumor growth. They are found in berries, green tea, dark chocolate and red grapes. Other foods high in flavonoids include beans, apples, onions, garlic and Brussels sprouts. Have 4-5 servings of these vegetables each day (one serving = 1/2 cup cooked or 1 cup raw).
3. Have a dark green salad every day. Include some kale, endive and spinach. Dark greens help the body to produce Nitric Oxide, a powerful gas that is toxic to bacteria and cancer cells. Make sure these greens are raw. Grate some raw beets onto your salad for an extra nitric oxide boost. Top with orange slices or red pepper for added vitamin C.

4. Reduce your consumption of dairy products, particularly those high in fat. Dairy consumption has been linked to prostate, testicular, breast and ovarian cancers, possibly due to the hormone responsiveness of the glands in these organs. Skim milk has the lowest level of hormones as well as the lowest levels of saturated fat. Don’t let the percentages fool you: 2% milk is approximately 30% fat, and 1% is about 15% fat. Plus they are all equally high in cholesterol which is a risk factor for heart disease.

5. Get your vitamin D. It’s not just for bone health. Vitamin D has been shown to be a cellular differentiator, meaning, it can tell the difference between those liver or skin cells we want to replicate, and those cancer cells we do not. Without adequate vitamin D, all cells replicate, including the cells we don’t want. Oregon recommendations are higher than the RDIs, between 2000 and 4000 IU per day. See your doctor for a vitamin D test to find right supplemental dose for you.

Prepping the soil Don’t give cancer a place in your body to grow, or the food it likes to eat. Cut back on processed foods including grains that are not 100% whole, cured and smoked meats and foods/drinks high in sugars. Instead, fill your plate with dark green leafys and other whole foods as close to natural as possible. Include small amounts of lean proteins and flavor with spices, nuts and seeds instead of butter, margarine or oil. Start a walking program now that it’s spring, and by all means, quit smoking. You’ve got an 80% chance of preventing cancer, but only if you start doing something about it now.

Health Presentations We’re taking April off but will resume the health presentations on Friday, May 31st at the Chetco Activity Center in Brookings. Stay tuned to next month’s article for the May class topic.

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