

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Can Diet Affect Cancer Risk?”

Many factors can contribute to the development of chronic diseases, including certain types of cancer. The link between diet and cancer risk is complicated. However, certain dietary patterns and food choices do have associations with an increased risk of cancer. In 2018, an estimated 18.1 million new cases of cancer were diagnosed globally, and 9.6 million died from the disease. One in 5 men and 1 in 6 women worldwide will develop cancer during their lifetime, and 1 in 8 men and 1 in 11 women will die from cancer. The increasing cancer burden is due to several factors, including population growth and ageing. Eliminating or lowering exposure to known lifestyle and environmental risk factors could prevent from one-third to two-fifths of new cancer cases. Research shows that environmental causes, including dietary can also affect cancer risk. In the early 1960s, researchers discovered that cancer rates varied between countries and identified that specific dietary patterns have correlations with certain types of cancer. They also discovered that cancer rates in people from countries with a low cancer risk who migrated to countries with higher cancer risk matched or exceeded the cancer rates in the country they migrated to. This suggests that diet and lifestyle strongly impacted cancer development. Since then, researchers have narrowed down the specific foods and dietary patterns that may increase the risk of certain cancers. It is important to remember that alcohol intake is also a known dietary risk factor for cancer development. Scientists know there is a strong link between processed meat intake and certain types of cancer. In 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), part of the World Health Organization (WHO), classified processed meat as carcinogenic and unprocessed red meat as “probably” carcinogenic. A 2018 review found that increasing intake of processed meat up to about 60 grams (g) per day and red meat up to 150 g per day increased colorectal cancer risk by about 20%. According to health experts, diets high in ultra-processed foods, including Western diets, significantly increase the risk of certain cancers. Examples of ultra-processed foods and beverages include ultra-processed sweet and savory snack foods, soda and energy drinks, breakfast cereals, reconstituted meat products, frozen pizzas, candy, and more. A 2018 study that included data on almost 105,000 people found that increasing the dietary proportion of ultra-processed foods by 10% had associations with a significant 12% increased risk of overall cancer and an 11% increased chance of developing breast cancer. Ultra-processed foods are rich in saturated fat, added sugar, and salt but low in protective nutrients, such as fiber, vitamins, and minerals.

In the America that I love, we should focus on cancer prevention. Early detection is key to survival.

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