

NUTRITION & WOMEN'S HEALTH

Preventive medicine and good nutrition are becoming increasingly more important today as many women are living into their late 80s. As women age, they are faced with concerns beyond the effects of menopause. Women face increased risk of chronic diseases such as osteoporosis, cancer, heart disease, macular degeneration, and cataracts as they live longer. While good nutrition alone cannot prevent or cure these chronic diseases, there is good evidence to show it can certainly reduce the risk and at times, slow the progression of some of them. Here is a "snapshot" of some of these diseases and the foods that may offer some protection.

CANCER

When it comes to diet, the overall cancer prevention message has changed over the past few decades from one stressing what *not to* eat to one that emphasizes what you *should* eat.

Breast Cancer

1 in 8 women in the US will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. More and more women are surviving as diagnosis and treatments improve. About 90% of those diagnosed with breast cancer now survive five years after diagnosis. The findings of the American Institute for Cancer Research's latest report continue to recommend these strategies as the most powerful for reducing breast cancer risk: eating a plant-based diet, maintaining a healthy weight, and getting regular physical activity. Alcohol can influence blood levels of estrogen and other hormones that can make cancer more likely and can cause cellular damage that can trigger cancer development. It is their recommendation that drinking alcohol, in any form, raises breast cancer risk. Carrying excess body fat also increases the risk for post-menopausal breast cancer. Being overweight or obese increases blood levels of insulin and hormones that can encourage the growth of cancer. Fat tissue also increases inflammation in the body, which can promote cancerous changes in healthy cells. Getting active can help decrease breast cancer risk by regulating hormone levels and helping maintain a healthy weight.

Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer is the only type of cancer that has a screening test (Pap) to assist in early detection. 1 in 159 women have a risk of developing cervical cancer. Inadequate folate intake has been linked to cervical cancer. Studies have shown that a woman may make herself more vulnerable to the sometimes-cancer-causing human papilloma virus when she has low blood levels of folic acid.

Ovarian Cancer

1 in 80 women are estimated to be at risk for developing ovarian cancer. Risk increases with age, as half of ovarian cancer cases occur in women aged 63 and older. This is one of the most silent cancers, often with no symptoms until the disease has progressed to advanced stages. **It is likely that an increased body weight increases risk of ovarian cancer.** According to the American Institute for Cancer Research, four recent studies showed that diets with plenty of fruits and vegetables reduced the risk of ovarian cancer by one-third to two-thirds.

Cancer-protecting foods: Asparagus, berries, beans, cauliflower, bok choy, garlic, broccoli, kale, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, tomatoes, green tea, flax meal, grapes, grape juice, apricots, cantaloupe, butternut squash, salmon, walnuts

HEART DISEASE

While breast cancer is probably the most feared cause of death among women, heart disease kills more women than all forms of cancer combined. 1 in 3 women die of heart disease. The American Heart Association has identified several factors that increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. The more risk factors a woman has, the greater her risk of having a heart attack or stroke. Some of these risk factors you can't control, such as increasing age, family health history, race, and sex. But you can modify, treat, or control most risk factors to lower your risk. These include high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure, overweight/obesity, diabetes mellitus, and lack of physical activity. Specific heart-healthy diet changes include eating more sources of soluble fiber, more sources of omega-3 fats, fewer saturated fats, avoiding trans fats and increasing antioxidant intake from plant-based foods including fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Heart-protecting foods: Olive oil, canola oil, salmon, mackerel, wheat germ, sardines, flax meal, walnuts, barley, oatmeal, other oat cereals, fruits, vegetables, beans, bean soups, whole grain breads

AGE-RELATED MACULAR DEGENERATION

Age-related macular degeneration (ARMD) is the leading cause of blindness in older Americans. It damages the macula, the part of the eye that turns light into color images in your brain and blurs your central vision. Because the baby boom generation is coming "of age," the prevalence of ARMD is expected to increase. It is projected that by 2050, the number of cases of ARMD will more than double from 2 million to 5.44 million. Some risk factors for ARMD you can't control (family history, older age, and light-colored eyes, skin, and hair). But you can improve other risks by eating a healthful diet, not smoking, wearing UVA/UVB-protective eyewear and brimmed hats and lowering high blood cholesterol levels. In a Harvard study, researchers followed 261 people aged 60 and older who had signs of ARMD in at least one eye. After five years, they found that the following dietary factors slowed the progression of ARMD: More nuts and fish, less total dietary fat, less trans fats, and less animal fat. Consume foods high in antioxidants such as lutein, zeaxanthin, and beta carotene.

Eye-protecting foods: Yellow corn, broccoli, apricots, butternut squash, kale, spinach, peas, oranges, peppers, kiwi, grapefruit, sunflower seeds, hazelnuts, almonds, peanut butter, wheat germ, fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, sardines, herring), milk (vitamin D-fortified), egg yolks

OSTEOPOROSIS

10 million Americans have osteoporosis and another 44 million have low bone density. 1 in 2 women and up to 1 in 4 men will break a bone in their lifetime due to osteoporosis. While most women know they need calcium, few realize that the mineral magnesium is critical as it aids the absorption of calcium, as does vitamin D. It's a challenge for women to get all the calcium they need solely from food, especially if they're not fond of dairy foods. The National Institutes of Health recommend calcium supplements for postmenopausal women if dietary intake is low. Speak with a nutrition professional or with your doctor.

Bone-protecting foods: Low-fat or nonfat yogurt and milk, low-fat cheese, calcium and Vitamin D fortified plant milks, calcium and Vitamin D fortified orange juice, green leafy vegetables, tofu, fish with bones, such as sardines, oily fish, such as salmon, eggs

Resources: American Cancer Society, American Heart Association; American Institute for Cancer Research; CDC, NIH