

High-fiber food may help decrease risk of colon cancer

Q I have a family member who was recently diagnosed with colon cancer. Is the risk for colon cancer all related to genetics, or is there something I can do to lower my risk? I am mostly a vegetarian. — MK, Greenville

A If you are over the age of 45 years, you should be talking with your doctor about screening for colon cancer. More and more young and middle-aged adults, including people in their early 50s, are developing colorectal cancer.

What you eat plays a key role in prevention. Catherine Gray, an ECU Brody medical student answers your question today.

The key takeaway is this: we cannot control our genetics, but we can control what we put into our body. The American Cancer Society, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) and other health

organizations recommend screening for colon cancer beginning at age 45 if there is no family history of colon cancer.

Decreasing alcohol intake, smoking cessation, increasing physical activity, and eating foods high in dietary fiber while cutting down on ultra-processed foods can help decrease your risk of developing colon cancer. Here is why adding more fiber to your diet may help decrease your risk for colon cancer.

Colorectal cancer is the third most common type of cancer in the world. According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, colorectal cancer was the 2nd leading cause of cancer deaths in the state of North Carolina in 2019, meaning colorectal cancer has a significant impact on our state as a whole.

Research suggests that being picky about what foods are in our diet can have an impact on the prevention of colon cancer. Particularly, dietary fiber has been shown to have a protective effect against the development of colon cancer. The scientific literature on this topic is complex but comes down to these things: fiber

binds carcinogens (also known as the things that cause cancer), it increases gut motility so that toxins spend less time in contact with the gut wall and it creates an environment that is beneficial to our “good” gut bacteria.

Fiber is a carbohydrate that, unlike other carbohydrates, is not broken down into sugars. Fiber helps to regulate blood sugar levels and hunger. It is found in many foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes and cereal.

Most people have heard of insoluble and soluble fiber. A more up-to-date way of thinking about dietary fiber is based on how it functions in the body: bulking, fermenting, or resisting (viscosity).

It is the insoluble, or bulking fibers, found in whole wheat products, brown rice, leafy greens and various nuts and seeds that have the greatest association with lowering the risk of colorectal cancer. It is recommended that while shopping for grains, you look at the Nutrition Facts label, and choose a cereal or other whole wheat products with 20% or higher of the daily value (DV) of fiber in one serving.

On the ingredient label, you also might look for the terms: psyllium, cellulose or polydextrose. A good option to add fiber to the diet includes adding a psyllium fiber supplement such as Metamucil. There is value in consuming soluble, fermentable, resisting fibers as well.

Additional studies need to be done to definitively demonstrate that eating fiber decreases the risk of colon cancer. Fiber also appears to lower the risk of developing other chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and diverticular disease.

I discussed the concept of ultra-processed foods, a term widely used but often lacking clear definition. It is commonly associated with “junk food” or items to be consumed sparingly. Ultra-processed foods typically lack significant dietary fiber.

It's crucial not to confuse ultra-processed with processed foods. Ultra-processed foods are thought to be those with little nutritional value and may lead to overconsumption leading to obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. There is still much to learn.

In the meantime, there are

many healthy and affordable options within the processed food category. For instance, canned fruits and vegetables without added salt or sugar, as well as cereals without added sugars, flavors, and colors, are nutritious processed choices. Yogurt, soy, and other plant milks are both processed and healthy, whereas raw milk carries potential risks.

Additionally, frozen fruits and vegetables retain their nutrient content, and processed variations, such as cleaned, sliced, and convenient-to-eat options, also offer nutritional benefits.

There is a link between drinking too much alcohol and colon cancer. Fellow med student Bryce Pugh's column last week (Jan. 24) described moderate alcohol intake and the servings sizes of beer, wine and spirits. If you are consuming more than the serving sizes outlined, drinking less will help reduce your risk of colon cancer.

Professor emeritus Kathy Kolasa, a registered dietitian nutritionist and Ph.D., is an affiliate professor in the Brody School of Medicine at ECU. Contact her at kolaska@ecu.edu.



KATHY KOLASA

TASTEFOOD

Spicy stew will transport you to Morocco

This spicy, aromatic lamb stew is inspired by a traditional Moroccan meat-and-vegetable tagine called mrouzia, a sweet and rich celebratory stew that is prepared in the days following Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice, and sweetened with raisins, honey and spice.

In this stew recipe, the sweetness is scaled back, and tomato

and carrots are added for a balance of acidity and brightness. The raisins are replaced by dried apricots, which are earthy, less sweet and provide a pleasant tartness. The spice list is an extreme abbreviation of ras el hanout, which is a North African staple blend comprising a lengthy list of spices — upward of 20. This recipe features a short list that shouldn't tax your spice cabinet and will drive in fragrance and flavor without sending you on a shopping expedition.

Prepare and serve this stew in the same day, or, better yet, let it sit in the refrigerator overnight to improve its flavor.

MOROCCAN LAMB STEW

Active time: 30 minutes

Total time: 2 hours 45 minutes

Yield: Serves 4 to 6

Ingredients:

2 1/2 pounds boneless lamb leg, cut into 1 to 1 1/2-inch chunks
Salt
Freshly ground black pepper



PHOTO BY LYNDA BALSLEV FOR TASTEFOOD
Prepare and serve Moroccan lamb stew in the same day, or, better yet, let it sit in the refrigerator overnight to improve its flavor.

Olive oil
1 medium yellow onion, chopped
4 garlic cloves, minced
2 tablespoons minced fresh peeled ginger
2 teaspoons ground coriander
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon sweet paprika
1/2 teaspoon allspice
1 (28-ounce) can Italian plum tomatoes
2 cups chicken stock, or more as needed
10 to 12 dried apricots, halved if large
1 (2-inch) cinnamon stick
1 tablespoon harissa paste
2 to 3 carrots, thickly sliced
1 tablespoon honey or light brown sugar
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves, plus more for garnish
Chopped red chiles for garnish, optional
Steps:
Heat the oven to 300 degrees. Evenly season the lamb with salt and black pepper.

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a Dutch oven or ovenproof pot with lid over medium-high heat. Add the lamb in batches, without overcrowding, and brown on all sides, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer the lamb to a plate or bowl and repeat with the remaining lamb.

Pour off the fat from the pan. Add 1 tablespoon oil and the onion to the same pot. Sauté over medium heat until the onion softens, about 2 minutes, stirring up the brown bits. Add the garlic, ginger, coriander, cumin, paprika and allspice and stir and toast until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add the tomatoes, 2 cups chicken stock, apricots, cinnamon stick, harissa paste, 1 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper. Return the lamb to the pot with any collected juices. (The lamb should be submerged in the liquid. Add more chicken stock to cover, if necessary.) Bring to a simmer, then cover the pot and transfer to the oven. Cook until the lamb is tender, about 2 hours, stirring once or twice.

While the lamb is cooking, heat 1 tablespoon oil in a skillet. Add the carrots and cook until crisp-tender, 6 to 8 minutes.

When the lamb is ready, transfer the pot to the stovetop and stir in the carrots. Simmer uncovered over medium-low heat until the carrots are tender, about 10 to 15 minutes. Stir in the honey and cilantro and taste for seasoning. If more heat is desired, add additional harissa.

Ladle into bowls and garnish with chiles and additional cilantro.

Lynda Balslev is an award-winning writer, cookbook author, and recipe developer based in northern California.

ASK THE DOCTORS

Dangers of raw milk arise from bacteria

Q We might start buying raw milk from a family farm in our area. It seems safe because they have only two cows and test the milk for bacteria. But when I told my dad, he said raw milk is always risky. Is that true?

A The term “raw milk” refers to milk that does not undergo pasteurization. That's the process of heating milk to the high temperatures needed to kill bacteria and other microbes.

The safety of raw milk is a hot-button issue with deeply held opinions, both pro and con. On one side are public health officials, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who warn of the potential dangers of milk that has not been sufficiently processed to kill bacteria. On the other side are advocates, often impassioned, who say that modern-day dairy practices have removed the risks associated with raw milk and that pasteurization strips the milk of vital nutrients.

The potential dangers of raw milk arise from bacteria including salmonella, E. coli, listeria and brucella. They can make anyone ill, but are particularly dangerous to young children, older adults and individuals with weakened immune systems. Diseases known to be caused by contaminated raw milk include tuberculosis, diphtheria, listeriosis, Guillain-Barre syndrome and typhoid fever.

Microbes may come directly from the animal, or they can contaminate milk in the series of steps that take place as it makes its way to the consumer. This includes during milking, packaging and storage.

Milk of any kind is an excellent medium for bacterial growth and requires vigilant hygiene to keep it safe. According to the CDC, improper



EVE GLAZIER



ELIZABETH KO

handling of milk leads to nearly triple the hospitalizations of any other type of foodborne illness.

Advocates of raw milk point to the numerous precautions taken by modern dairy farmers who produce and sell it. This includes maintaining the health of the animals, hygienic milking conditions and practices, safety practices during packaging and transport and extensive testing for the presence of bacteria. However, the CDC states that testing does not consistently detect low levels of microbial contamination, which can make someone sick. The agency also points to data that show some people have

become seriously ill from raw milk that was procured from dairies that do regular testing.

At this time, the sale of raw milk is subject to a patchwork of laws. The FDA banned the sale or distribution of raw milk across state lines in 1987. However, the states themselves are free to allow and regulate the sale of the product within their own borders.

Today, 30 states allow the sale and distribution of raw milk, and 20 states prohibit it. Whether it is legally available in your area, and the specific venues where you can purchase it, depend on your state's particular laws.

In our own practices, if the topic of raw milk arises, we share both sides of the issue with our patients. And when it comes to our advice, our approach is to urge patients to consider easing away from cow's milk altogether and to consider plant-based products instead.

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