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What you should eat (and avoid) to beat breast cancer

You can't change your family history but your diet can help lower your risk

By Karen Asp

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- When it comes to reducing breast cancer risk, you can't change your family history. But you can change your nutritional habits and that could go a long way in decreasing your risk.

“Because the majority of breast cancer cases don't have a genetic link, you have to conclude that lifestyle factors, including diet, play a large role,” says Mary Flynn, R.D., co-author of “The Pink Ribbon Diet” (Da Capo, 2010) and research dietitian at the Miriam Hospital in Providence, R.I.

To help lower your risk, here are five foods to eat and five you should avoid.

- **ADD THESE FOODS TO YOUR PLATE**

Rich Pedroncelli / AP

Extra virgin olive oil

The benefits: Olive oil isn't only loaded with risk-reducing [antioxidants](#) and phytonutrients -- including squalene which inhibits tumor growth -- it also has a higher monounsaturated fat content than other oils. Monounsaturated fats don't oxidize in the body. Oxidation, a process that produces chemicals called free radicals, increases cancer risk.

Reap the rewards: Add at least two tablespoons of olive oil a day to your diet, perhaps even tossing vegetables in oil, which will make veggies tastier and encourage you to eat more. Use one tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil for every cup of veggies. Although it can be high in calories -- about 120 calories per tablespoon-- studies have found that the more extra virgin olive oil in your diet, the lower your risk.

Cruciferous vegetables

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The benefits: Cruciferous veggies contain phytonutrients that stop the spread of cancer and halt cancer cells from forming. These phytonutrients also shift estrogen metabolism so your [body](#) produces a form of estrogen that doesn't drive breast cancer.

Reap the rewards: Load your diet with broccoli, broccoli rabe, brussels sprouts, cabbage and kale. To get a bigger cancer-busting bang, cook them in oil, preferably extra virgin olive oil, which will help your body absorb more nutrients.

- Dark green leafy vegetables

USDA

The benefits: Leafy veggies are loaded with folate, a B [vitamin](#) that strengthens your DNA. Low levels of folate have been linked to increased cancer risk.

Reap the rewards: Choose spinach and kale, as the darker the leaves, the better.

- Fatty fish

Katsumi Kasahara / AP file

The benefits: Women who consumed fish oil supplements had a 32 percent lower risk of developing breast cancer after six years compared to non-users, according to a study from the journal Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention. Fatty fish contains [omega-3](#) fatty acids, which may decrease inflammation in the body. Researchers believe chronic inflammation may encourage breast cancer development.

Reap the rewards: Although women in the above study took supplements, researchers recommend getting omega-3s directly from fish. Chomp at least two 3.5-ounce servings of fatty fish like salmon, tuna and mackerel each week.

Tomatoes

Brian Snyder / Reuters

The benefits: Tomatoes are packed with lycopene, a [powerful antioxidant](#) that not only gives tomatoes their redness but also protects against breast cancer by stopping cancer cell growth.

Reap the rewards: Your body absorbs lycopene best when tomatoes are cooked, concentrated or processed. Top sources include canned tomatoes, tomato sauces and

tomato paste so you no longer have to feel guilty about indulging in pasta and pizza (as long as it's veggie).

- GO EASY ON THESE FOODS

Sean Gallup / Getty Images

Red meat

Why it's bad: Grilling red meat creates compounds called heterocyclic amines (HCA), which drive cancers. Red meat also contains amino acids that stimulate the production of [insulin](#) and increase oxidation in the body, both of which boost cancer risk. In one study, women who ate well-done meat three times a week increased breast cancer risk by over 400 percent.

Tame your tastebuds: You don't have to give up your meat-eating ways and turn vegetarian, but do limit red meat consumption, eating no more than six ounces a month.

- Grapefruit

Why it's bad: Grapefruit may elevate levels of estrogen, which is associated with increased [breast cancer risk](#). In a study from the British Journal of Cancer, women who ate a quarter grapefruit or more a day had a 30 percent increased risk of breast cancer.

Tame your tastebuds: If you're a grapefruit junkie, switch to other citrus fruits until more research is done, especially if you've had estrogen-receptor-positive breast cancer.

Vegetable oils

Why they're bad: Vegetable oils, including soybean, safflower, sunflower and corn, are high in polyunsaturated fats, which increase cancer-promoting oxidation in the body

Tame your tastebuds: Replace vegetable oils with extra virgin olive oil or canola oil. Unfortunately, you should also eliminate mayonnaise (unless it's made with olive or canola oil and contains no partially hydrogenated fats), margarine and foods that contain

partially hydrogenated oil (i.e. peanut butter, cookies and muffins), as all of these foods contain vegetable oils. The upshot? You now have permission to eat butter again.

- Sweets

Seth Wenig / AP file

Why they're bad: Women who reported consuming the most sweets, including desserts, sweetened beverages and added sugars, had a 27 percent greater risk of breast cancer than women who consumed less, according to the journal *Cancer Causes and Control*. A diet high in refined carbohydrates like those found in sweets is associated with higher levels of [blood glucose](#), forcing the body to release insulin. That insulin encourages cancer cells to grow and could result in higher levels of estrogen, which may promote the development of breast cancer.

Tame your tastebuds: Keep that sweet tooth in check. Although you don't have to go cold turkey, view sweets as an occasional treat, not a daily indulgence.

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- Processed meats

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Why it's bad: Researchers suspect that compounds used as preservatives in processed meat like deli meats, bacon, ham and hot dogs morph into cancer-causing compounds in the body.

Tame your tastebuds: Cut all processed meat from your diet. If you must indulge, do so only during special occasions.

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