Five Tips for a Healthy Summer (and Life)!

From bench to beachside: Empower yourself with evidenced-based cancer-prevention science.

July 23, 2018 By Diane Mapes

It's hard not to sound shamey, blamey and preachy — three of the lesser-known Dwarves — when you talk about cancer prevention. So many of the culprits that public health researchers point to are baked into our behaviors.

Red meat and starchy potatoes at our meals? A little sunbathing come summer? White chocolate mocha Frappuccino? Surely, that can't be all that bad, can it? In moderation, no. In excess — absolutely.

But scientists aren't trying to make you feel guilty when they tell you to drop a few pounds or skip that second martini. They're just sharing the data. Disease prevention hinges on data gathered through good science.

And here at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, we're all about the good science. Our epidemiologists have spent decades studying the exposures that increase our risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity. They've painstakingly sifted through data to understand what drives disease and what cuts it off at the knees. Even better, they're developing tools to help people kick the habits that harm health.

Sure, disease is sometimes driven by a wonky bit of inherited DNA (thanks, Mom and Dad!) or some biological misfiring we've yet to fully understand, but it's also true that a lot of it is brought about by our exposures, our behaviors and, yes, our choices (and you bet that gets complicated when a choice is dictated by addiction, as with smoking).

Choose mindfully and you can substantially curb your risk for those four horsemen of poor health — cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity.

And that can feel pretty darn empowering. As in cutting cancer risk by 30 to 50 percent empowering, per the latest World Cancer Research Fund report. And the stuff that kicks cancer risk to the curb usually helps fend off the other diseases, as well.

Want to make this your healthiest summer yet? Empower yourself — and your loved ones — with

some disease-squelching science and practical prevention tips from our public health researchers.

Feast on fruits and vegetables

These colorful cancer fighters are everywhere during summer — and that bounty usually means prices are lower, too. Hit the local farmers market and stock up on all kinds and all colors.

Those that are richest in hue — like kale, spinach, cantaloupe, sweet potatoes and peppers — contain vitamin A, which can help keep cells healthy.

And fruits, such as berries and vitamin-C-rich oranges, grapefruit and kiwi are not only great for breakfast, snacks and dessert, they contain important cancer-fighting phytonutrients, as well.

Want to kick the legs out from underneath chronic illnesses like cancer and cardiovascular disease? Make vegetables, not meat, the center of most meals: they fill you up and can literally cut risk for some cancers, like prostate, nearly in half. Eat them raw, throw a bunch on the backyard grill, or make a soup and freeze it for fall.

Hutch epidemiologist Holly Harris, MPH, ScD, said she tries to get her kids involved when making her summer selections. “We like to go to farmers markets and find that our kids are more likely to eat vegetables that they’ve picked out themselves.”

Stay safe in the sun

Nearly 5 million U.S. adults are treated every year for all types of skin cancer (at a cost of $8.1 billion). And the rate of melanomas, the deadliest form, has doubled since 1982, enough to nudge the surgeon general into a call to action to prevent skin cancer.

But we are hardly powerless in the face of these statistics; most of these cancers are preventable by simply covering up.

“Dermatologists don’t give wiggle room to avoid sunscreen,” said Fred Hutch epidemiologist (and author) Anne McTiernan, MD, PhD. “They want people to use it every day, even for walking between buildings.”

Find a broad-spectrum sunscreen that protects against both UVA and UVB rays. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends applying a thick layer of that sunscreen that’s at least SPF 15 before going outside, even on cloudy or cool days. McTiernan and the American Cancer Society recommend SPF 30. Also, be mindful that some sunscreens are harmful to coral reefs and may even be banned in certain places. Sunscreen should be reapplied after two hours in the sun or after swimming, sweating or using a towel. Other pro tips: stay in the shade, wear clothing that covers your skin, wear a wide-brimmed hat or use a parasol or “sun-brella.”

Also, stay away from tanning beds (and make sure you teach your kids to avoid them, too). And wear sunglasses to protect those beautiful peepers.

Lean into lean meat and meatless meals

While plants are the bomb, red meats and processed meats like ham, bologna, bacon and hot dogs aren't doing our cells, our arteries or our colons any favors.

The World Health Organization has classified red meat (that's beef, veal, pork, lamb, mutton and any other red muscle meat) as "probably carcinogenic" due to its link to colorectal, prostate and pancreatic cancer. Processed meats are even more problematic. According to Marian Neuhouser, PhD, RD, head of Fred Hutch's Cancer Prevention Program, they're "higher in fat, very high in sodium … and contain curing agents such as nitrites that have been shown to be detrimental."

Not-so-fun fact: For every 50 grams of processed, preserved or cured meat eaten per day — that's about two slices of bacon, by the way — you're bumping up your risk for colorectal cancer by 16 percent.

If you're a meat-eater, try to focus on chicken or fish; they both cook up great on an outdoor grill and don't come with the same risks. If you must have red meat, limit your intake to just three small portions a week. Pro tip: Make meat more of an understudy than the star of your meal by tucking it into a stir-fry, kebob or savory summer salad.

You can also deliver a powerful preventive punch to cancer by not going ga-ga with your grilling. According to McTiernan (and many other experts), "very high heat seems to release carcinogens."

Be a good (summer) sport

What's the absolute best way to cut your risk for at least 13 cancers (including recurrence) as well as just about every other chronic disease out there? Move that body.

Summer is the perfect time to get active. Swimming, skating, paddleboarding, biking, hiking, kayaking, softball, potato sack races — the choices are almost unlimited. (Just don't forget the sunscreen if you're active outside.)

National fitness guidelines call for only 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity a week for adults. That's just 30 minutes of movement, five days a week.

"That can be accomplished with a daily 30-minute walk," said McTiernan. "You do not need to be an athlete. You don't even need to buy expensive shoes."

Guidelines also recommend a bit of strength training a couple of times a week.

Research also shows that moving your body on a regular basis cuts stress, improves sleep, boosts your mood and helps you lose weight. As McTiernan recently put it, "if you're taking a walk, or pedaling on a stationary bike or doing an elliptical machine, you're not stuffing your face with food."

Need some motivation (or accountability)? Keep a fitness journal, sign up for classes and/or

partner with a buddy — or your entire family — for walks and workouts.

Drink up … but skip the booze and sugary sodas

Believe it or not, alcohol is not the best drink for your body. Even small amounts of beer, wine or hard liquor can bump your risk for a host of cancers, according to the latest report from the American Institute for Cancer Research, which McTiernan helped to compile. Reduce your alcohol intake and you'll fend off other chronic illnesses too, like cardiovascular and fatty liver disease.

This is not new news, of course. Consistently, research shows that the more you drink, the higher your risk of cancer (heavy drinkers face a particularly high risk of liver, throat and mouth, and colorectal cancers). But it's one of those "preachy" findings that we tend to conveniently forget every time happy hour rolls around.

If you do drink, try to stick with no more than one drink a day (5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, one shot of hard liquor).

As for that sugar-sweetened stuff — soda, sports drinks, energy drinks, sweetened waters, even fruit juice? They all contain sugars or syrups so they're problematic, too.

"If you want to make one change in dietary habit that will clearly benefit you with regard to the reduction of disease, it's reducing your intake of sugar-sweetened beverages like fruit drinks, energy drinks and soda," said the Hutch's Mario Kratz, MPH, who studies what food and drink does to our bodies.

What should you drink instead? Water, first and foremost. Unsweetened iced tea or lemonade can work, too. Cucumber mocktails? Watermelon slushies? Grab some refreshing summer fruit, some ice cubes and seltzer water and get creative with your blender.

Just don't forget to toast yourself and your smarts before you drink to that good health.

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