Following Simple Cancer Prevention Advice Does More Than Lower Cancer Risk

Maintaining a healthy body weight, being physically active and following a healthy diet are linked to improved survival.

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A new study led by a team at the National Cancer Institute (NCI), conducted in collaboration with the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) and American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) and published in Current Developments in Nutrition, examined health behaviors and mortality risk in a cohort of over 175,000 older (50-71 years of age at recruitment) Americans. They found that following a lifestyle aligned with the 2018 WCRF/AICR Cancer Prevention Recommendations was associated with a significant reduction in risk of all-cause, cancer-specific and cardiovascular-specific mortality.

And the changes in risk were substantial. The 2018 WCRF/AICR Score is a seven-point, standardized scoring system based on 10 evidence-based Cancer Prevention Recommendations published by the WCRF/AICR in 2018 focused on modifiable lifestyle factors including weight, physical activity, diet factors, and alcohol intake. This study found that each one-point increase in the 2018 WCRF/AICR Score was associated with a 9-26% reduced mortality risk, except in current male smokers' cancer mortality risk; the strongest associations were seen in former smokers.

When high versus lower scorers were compared, older adults who scored 5-7 points were 43-62% less likely to die of all-causes compared to those with 0–2-point scores. The results differed by sex and smoking status, with the strongest associations again in former smokers. The findings were similar for cancer and CVD-specific mortality. Associations with cancer and CVD-specific mortality were not significant among current male smokers, though this could have been impacted by the relatively small sample of current smokers in the study; it also supports that smoking is still a major modifiable risk factor when it comes to mortality risk.

Marissa Shams-White, lead Researcher and Program Director at Risk Assessment Branch, National Cancer Institute, said: "Overall, these results support the current evidence of the beneficial impact of healthy lifestyle habits in older adults. It's never too late to change day-to-day behaviors."

Physical activity, body weight, alcohol, and intake of plant-based foods (fruits and vegetables and

fiber intake) were found to be predominant components in the Score and had the greatest effect on outcomes in this study population. However, these components were not necessarily the only important factors, but rather provide context for the main contributors to mortality risk in this older adult population, who were relatively healthy, with high mean 2018 WCRF/AICR scores.

“Other score components related to the intake of sugar-sweetened beverages, ultra-processed foods, and red and processed meat may have different associations with mortality risk in other populations — such as among younger adults, cancer survivors, or those with pre-existing cardiovascular conditions. It’s important to continue to consider the 2018 WCRF/AICR Cancer Prevention Recommendations together as a whole,” said Shams-White.

Nigel Brockton, vice president of research at the American Institute for Cancer Research, said: “This study shows the significant impact of lifestyle factors on living longer healthier lives. Following these simple, evidence-based cancer prevention recommendations that are under our control, is linked to improved cancer-specific, cardiovascular and overall survival in older adults.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cancer is the second leading cause of death in the U.S., but more than half of cancer deaths can be prevented through healthy choices, screening and vaccinations. These results underline the importance of following the AICR’s 10 Cancer Prevention Recommendations to reduce cancer risk and mortality. An easy way for Americans to incorporate the Cancer Prevention Recommendations into their lives is by starting the Healthy10 Challenge, AICR’s 10-week interactive program, which helps build healthy lifestyle habits. Each week features a different challenge to help Americans eat better, be more active, and reduce alcohol intake. Weekly emails include motivational exercise tips, nourishing recipes, and nutritional guidance.

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