Links Between Heart Disease and Cancer Emerge

Researchers found that having a heart attack was associated with a higher risk of developing cancer.

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People who have a heart attack have a higher risk of developing cancer, according to a new study. This new research also found that having more risk factors for cardiovascular disease (CVD) is associated with a greater risk of cancer.

The new finding is indirect evidence that the steps you take to prevent heart disease may also help reduce the risk of several common cancers, including colorectal, breast, prostate and lung cancer.

“It’s a double whammy,” the study’s lead author, Emily Lau, MD, a cardiology fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, said in a press release. “Heart disease and cancer are the two leading causes of death in the United States. We now recognize that they are intimately linked.”

Lau presented findings from an analysis of data regarding 12,712 participants in the Framingham Heart Study at the American Heart Association’s Scientific Sessions 2019 last week in Philadelphia. The participants, who were 51 years old on average, did not have cancer or CVD when they entered the study.

To assess CVD risk, the study relied on the American Heart Association/American College of Cariology’s Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease (ASCVD) Risk Estimator, which estimates the probability that an individual will develop CVD within 10 years. Researchers also looked to biomarkers in the blood.

Over a nearly 15-year period, the participants were diagnosed with 1,670 cases of cancer: 19% of these were gastrointestinal, 18% were breast, 16% were prostate and 11% were lung cancer.

The study authors found that various CVD risk factors, including age, sex, high blood pressure and smoking were independently associated with cancer risk.

Compared with those with a 5% or lower 10-year CVD risk, those with a 20% risk of developing

CVD within 10 years according to the ASCVD estimator were more than three times as likely to develop cancer.

People who experienced a heart attack, heart failure or atrial fibrillation were more than seven times more likely to subsequently receive a cancer diagnosis compared with those who did not experience those forms of CVD.

Individuals with high levels of the biomarker B-type natriuretic peptide (BNP), which is often high among those with heart failure, had a higher risk of cancer compared with those with low BNP levels.

“Cancer and cardiovascular disease share many of the same risk factors, such as tobacco use, poor nutrition and lack of physical activity,” said Lau. “The next step is to identify the biological mechanisms driving the link between cardiovascular disease and cancer.”

According to the American Heart Association, the “Life’s Simple 7” lifestyle habits for reducing CVD risk may also lower the risk of certain cancers These include:

1. eating a healthy diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and lean protein
2. being physically active
3. refraining from any tobacco or nicotine products, including cigarettes and vape pens
4. reaching and keeping a healthy body weight as well as optimal cholesterol, glucose and blood pressure levels.

To read a Cancer Health article on foods that may help prevent both heart disease and cancer, click here.

For tips on increasing fruits and vegetables in your diet, click here.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

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