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Dr. Julie: An Integrative Medicine Perspective

by Julie T. Chen, MD
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Our Weapons to Fight Cancer

Most of my patients are scared of the "C" word ... yes, that's C for cancer. Let's face it, we all are to some degree. But when you have family history of various cancers, the fear becomes a daily reality as to when the big C might occur.

These patients are right to want to do everything possible to try to lower the risk of cancer. They will come in to see me with a bevy of questions about things that they have read on the Internet, and they want to sort out what is a gimmick and what is real. So, in this column, I would like to help tease out what we actually know clinically about cancer prevention so as to help guide all of you readers who have the same fears.

When it comes to evidence-based integrative medicine for cancer therapy and prevention, in general, we are lacking in confirmatory clinical studies for many supplements that patients like to use. However, there is some information available about some diets and supplements ... and we will touch on those here.

When it comes to those who have cancer and are being actively treated with radiation therapy or chemotherapy, the general recommendation is to avoid supplements and vitamins during ongoing therapy. There just is not enough clinical evidence as to what may benefit and what may impede the therapeutic process of chemotherapy and radiation.

There is concern that certain supplements and vitamins may counteract the benefits of radiation therapy or chemotherapy. Therefore, I recommend that my patients stop their vitamins during active ongoing therapy. However, during the active treatment period, you can use food as medicine to help augment therapy and ensure that you are not working against the treatments. So, I usually encourage my patients to eat a well-balanced highly anti-inflammatory diet to get their nutrients safely and effectively without adversely affecting their treatment regimen.

Once the ongoing treatments are done, patients are encouraged to continue with a highly anti-inflammatory, mostly plant-based diet, with lean organic hormone-free protein such as wild fish or chicken or turkey, to help them heal. If there are a lot of radiation-associated gastroenterological symptoms, I recommend my patients to blend their vegetables into a soup that is easier to swallow and digest. Red meat and meats that are cooked at high temperatures and charred should be avoided, since there is concern that they are more carcinogenic.

Sometimes, if the patients have lost significant weight and need to keep up their body weight and health, some oncologists will just have them eat whatever they want. I am not a fan of that recommendation, since junk food, if that's what the patient wants, is not going to provide enough nutrients for a body that is healing from the trauma of chemotherapy, radiation, and cancer. I will usually recommend ways to make healthful foods palatable, such as drizzling dark chocolate on berries or blending vegetables and fruits together for smoothies, with organic protein powder or ground nuts for protein.

If you are caring for someone in this position, the main point to keep in mind is to keep food soft, easily digestible, and palatable but make sure the foundation of the food is nutritious for a healing body. You can use hearty amounts of olive oil as a healthful fat in cooking meals or soups and can use vitamin-enriched whole grains in meals ... but the key point is that the healing body needs nutrients, and it's not just the weight that you want to regain, but the body needs to regain those nutrients as well to heal. By using larger quantities of nutrients such as the healthful fats in olive oil, nuts, fish, and avocado, you can increase the caloric count while still ensuring that you are getting plenty of nutrients into the healing body.

Another important point is to make sure that the patient gets plenty of fluids into the healing body because water is

necessary for cellular repair and healing. Healthful liquids such as dairy, water, and antioxidant-rich drinks such as green tea should be an integral part of the healing body diet.

Lastly, there are various supplements that have been seen to have some anticancer properties. One of the most important ones that I use over and over in my clinic is curcumin with black pepper. The black pepper increases systemic absorption significantly, so make sure that the version you get has black pepper as an active ingredient.

I also like to utilize foods or supplements rich in pectin and indole-3-carbinol because these are beneficial for cancer patients as well. Pectin can be found in the white pith around oranges, and indole-3-carbinol is abundant in cruciferous vegetables such as cauliflower, broccoli, and brussels sprouts.

Finally, vitamin D should be adequately replaced in people with cancer, because vitamin D is a hormone in the body and studies show that those who are deficient are potentially at higher risk for cancer and when cancer occurs, there's a chance that it may be more aggressive in staging. So, make sure that your doctor is checking your vitamin D levels and don't be fine with just a low normal level of vitamin D ... shoot for midlevel numbers and make sure that you take enough vitamin D3 to keep you at that middle of the normal range D level.

So, as you can see, there are very doable ways to incorporate an anticancer regimen into your daily life if you know what to focus on. If I can leave just one take-away point in your mind, the most important would be to eat a well-balanced, highly anti-inflammatory, mostly plant-based diet on a daily basis.

Using food as medicine is truly the most safe and effective way to prevent cancer and to help heal after cancer therapy. Our bodies are created to function most optimally on this type of diet, so why not use what the body knows is good for us to gain the positive outcome that you want ... and by doing so, give yourself the peace of mind that you've done all you can to make your body as healthy as it can be, no matter what your family history is.

Julie T. Chen, MD, is board-certified in internal medicine and is also fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, CA; is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations; is on several medical expert panels of websites as well as nonprofit organizations; is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines; and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates healing modalities into her practice, including but not limited to medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback.

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