Healthy Eating, Active Living, and Cancer: Making Health Lifestyles a National Priority

The Cancer Link

An unhealthful diet, excess body weight, alcohol consumption and physical inactivity account for at least 18.2% of cancer cases and 15.8% of cancer deaths in the U.S., the second highest percentages for any risk factor (after cigarette smoking) in both men and women.\(^1\)

Excess body fat can cause cancers of the breast (postmenopausal), endometrium, kidney (renal cell), esophagus (adenocarcinoma), colon, rectum, gastric cardia, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, ovary, thyroid, myeloma and meningioma.\(^{i,iii}\) There is some evidence that excess body fat probably increases the risk of advanced, high-grade, or fatal prostate cancer and cancers of the oral cavity, pharynx, and larynx.\(^{iv}\)

Sustained weight loss, even modest amounts, is associated with lower breast cancer risk among women over 50 years of age.\(^v\)

Nutrition

Poor diet, including the consumption of high-calorie foods and beverages, is a major contributor to excess weight and increases the risk of cancer. The American Cancer Society (ACS) recommends following a healthy eating pattern at all ages, in order to reduce cancer risk. A healthy eating pattern includes foods that are high in nutrients in amounts that help you get to and stay at a healthy weight, a variety of whole fruits and vegetables (including fiber-rich legumes), and whole grains. A healthy eating pattern limits or does not include processed and red meats, sugar-sweetened beverages, highly processed foods, and refined grains. For cancer prevention, it is best not to drink alcohol.\(^vi\) Recent research has found that non-smoking adults who followed the ACS guidelines for weight control, diet, physical activity, and alcohol consumption lived longer and had a lower risk of dying from cancer and cardiovascular disease.\(^{vii,viii}\)

Physical Activity

Regular physical activity helps to reduce cancer risk in a number of ways, including beneficial effects on metabolism, inflammation, and hormonal function, as well as through helping to maintain a healthy body weight. Physical activity may reduce the risk of up to eight types of cancer. ACS and other experts recommend that adults engage in at least 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75–150 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity each week (or a combination of the two) and that children and adolescents engage in at least one hour of moderate- or vigorous-intensity activity each day.\(^{ix,xx}\) Physical activity may also be beneficial after a cancer diagnosis by reducing the risk of recurrence or death and improving quality of life.\(^x\)
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**Combating the Problem**

Despite the evidence linking excess weight, poor nutrition, excess alcohol consumption, and physical inactivity to increased cancer risk, most Americans do not meet recommended nutrition and physical activity targets. Social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors strongly influence individual choices about diet and physical activity. Reversing obesity trends and reducing the associated cancer risk will require a broad range of strategies that include policy and environmental changes that make it easier for individuals to regularly make healthy diet and physical activity choices, and access to evidence-based treatment for obesity.

**ACS CAN: Advancing Evidenced-Based Policies that Encourage Healthy Lifestyles**

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN) is focused on public policies that help to create healthy social and physical environments and to provide consumers with clear, useful information that fosters healthy lifestyle choices. ACS CAN’s federal advocacy work is largely focused on protecting and implementing recent improvements in school nutrition, and that the federal government’s diet and physical activity guidelines reflect the current science on cancer risk. ACS CAN also advocates for a range of public policy changes at the state and local levels that make it easier for children and adults to eat a healthy diet and to be physically active, thereby reducing their long-term cancer risk.

**School Nutrition**

School meals offer students a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and age-appropriate portion sizes and may be the only nutritious meals many children eat during the day. In fact, a 2021 study evaluating the quality of meals consumed by both children and adults over a 16-year period found that school meals provided the highest quality food source for Americans, without population disparities — more so than grocery stores, restaurants, worksites, and food trucks. ACS CAN supports maintaining and continuing to implement evidence-based national school nutrition standards for school meals and snacks, including foods and beverages sold a la carte, in vending machines, and in school stores. ACS CAN opposes any efforts to weaken or roll back these important cancer-prevention policies. In addition, ACS CAN advocates for policies that support increasing access to free school meals at both the federal and state level aimed to reduce food insecurity and improve diet quality. ASC CAN advocates for both universal free school meal policies and expanding access to the Community Eligibility Provision that also allows high-poverty schools to offer all students free school meals at no charge to all students.

**Federal Diet and Physical Activity Guidelines**

ACS CAN strongly advocates that the federal *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (currently being updated) and *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* reflect the current science regarding diet, physical activity, and cancer risk. These guidelines help Americans lead a healthy lifestyle, including lowering their risk of cancer, and form the basis of all federal policies and programs. They also inform many private and state and local initiatives on nutrition and physical activity.

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Making Healthy Lifestyles a National Priority  |  August 2023

For more information on ACS CAN’s advocacy work around healthy eating and active living environments, please visit https://www.fightcancer.org/what-we-do/healthy-eating-and-active-living.


xii Kushi, 2012.