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Nine Steps Toward Better Health

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Health Focus Contributor

For women between the ages of 40 and 79, those in essentially the second half of life, cancer ranks as the leading cause of death. Most women are concerned about, if not downright fearful of cancer, but, aside from regular mammograms to identify early breast cancer, there's a general feeling of not being able to do much about it.

Results from the Iowa Women's Health Study challenge this notion and arm women with the knowledge that there is in fact a lot they can do to lower their risk of cancer, as well as many other diseases that threaten life or quality of life in the later years.

The American Institute for Cancer Research has a list of nine diet and lifestyle recommendations to lower cancer risk. The more of these nine recommendations that post-menopausal women followed, according to the Iowa Women's Health Study, the lower their risk of developing cancer. Women who followed only one or none of the recommendations were 35 percent more likely to develop cancer than women who followed at least six of the nine recommendations.

Data was gathered from 41,836 women who were between the ages of 55 and 69 when they were enrolled in 1986. The women reported information about height, weight, age, lifestyle factors, diet, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, cancer and other health and medical information. The initial survey was followed up in 1987, 1989, 1992 and 1997. And follow ups continue, generating invaluable information about the effects of heredity, diet and lifestyle choices on health and longevity.

Results of the study led researchers to conclude that 31 percent of cancers in older women can be prevented or delayed by following these nine recommendations.

1. Keeping your weight within the recommended body mass index (BMI) between 18.5 and 24.9. (A BMI over 30, for example, is classified as obese.)
2. Not gaining more than 11 pounds after age 18.
3. Getting regular exercise, including exercise vigorous enough to raise your heart rate.
4. Eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

5. Eating complex carbohydrates equivalent to about 14 ounces per day.
6. Having no more than one alcoholic drink per day.
7. Eating no more than 80 grams (approximately three ounces) of red meat per day.
8. Limiting fat intake to no more than 30 percent of total calories.
9. Limiting salt intake to 2,400 milligrams per day.

If the above sounds like a deceptively simple approach to lowering your risk of cancer by one third, it is. None of it is rocket science. It simply involves following a healthy diet and getting regular, vigorous exercise. The diet doesn't require special foods; nor does it prohibit types of food. It mainly requires that you limit yourself to moderate amounts of meat, fat and salt, while increasing your intake of fruit, vegetables and other complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, beans and legumes.

A Wealth of Findings

There were many specific findings, some of which confirmed other studies, and others that surprised researchers.

Whole grains were associated with consistently lower rates of cancer and heart disease as well as a lower incidence of type 2 diabetes. The multiple benefits of whole grains and cereal fiber were attributed to the fact that whole grains contain many phytochemicals as well as fiber and antioxidants that may reduce the risk of a number of chronic diseases.

Whole grains from cereals, pastas and breads as well as beans, fruits, vegetables and legumes are all complex carbohydrates, a key element of a healthy diet. The low-carb diet followed by so many Americans shortchanges women on many essential nutrients. Not only do foods rich in complex carbohydrates supply cancer-fighting phytochemicals and antioxidant vitamins, they're also satisfying and help create a feeling of fullness.

It's a myth that **carbohydrates** are responsible for obesity. Sugary desserts and baked goods and fried foods that are high in fat, sugar and carbohydrates are poor diet choices and the cause of a lot of weight problems. But high-fiber complex carbohydrates have formed the main energy source of the human diet for thousands of years.

Obesity is a twentieth century phenomenon, and certainly not the fault of complex carbohydrates. A combination of a sedentary lifestyle, high-fat foods, unhealthy carbs from pop and sweets and supersized portions contribute to our growing waistlines.

Cutting back the amount of **dietary fat** can reduce your risk of breast and colon cancer as well as

heart disease. Some obvious sources of fat in the diet include visible fat on meat, butter, oils, fried foods and baked goods.

Good steps include choosing leaner cuts and smaller portions of meat and substituting some fish and plant-based meals for meat dishes.

High fat consumption was linked to an elevated risk of a number of cancers and poorer survival rates. Postmenopausal women with breast cancer faced a higher rate of death if they had a high body mass index compared to women with breast cancer whose body mass index was in the normal range. A high intake of fat as part of a daily diet was also associated with a greater likelihood of dying after diagnosis with breast cancer.

There are many things in life that are beyond our control, but we can control what we eat and whether or not we exercise. Eating a healthy diet and following a regular exercise program take planning and commitment, but you can start small and build up.

Set yourself a goal of where you want to be in six months and start today. You might start small with a walk around the block, eating only half instead of a whole doughnut and adding a piece of fruit to your lunch.

Then challenge yourself each day to walk an extra block, climb a flight of stairs and gradually substitute whole grains, beans, fruits, vegetables, nuts and low-fat dairy for meals high in meat and fat. The more of the nine diet and lifestyle measures you follow, the lower your risk of heart disease, adult-onset diabetes and cancer. It's a chance to truly take control of your health and your life.

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