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# Disease fighters

## Certain foods may help reduce cancer risk



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Cancer affects millions of people each year; in fact, about 1 in 5 people will develop cancer in their lifetime, according to the World Health Organization.

I never gave much thought to cancer-fighting foods during my 30-year career as a nutritionist until breast cancer knocked on my door. I'd always eaten healthy foods, but I never intentionally sought out foods that purportedly fight the disease. However, after my diagnosis, I began researching how diet can positively and negatively affect cancer risk.

**Make density your destiny**  
Dr. Leigh Erin Connealy, medical director of the Cancer Center for Healing and the Center for New Medicine, Irvine, California, explains that cancer consists of many factors and that poor nutrition can contribute to the problem by placing significant stress on the body, which can cause cells to mutate. She recommends eating foods with a higher nutrient content relative to calories—foods like grass-fed meat, wild seafood, seasonal vegetables and fruits, honey and high-quality dairy.

Research makes it clear that diet can have a significant impact on one's cancer risk. Foods that may help reduce this risk are high in antioxidants and anti-inflammatory phytonutrients. Research suggests that plant-based compounds known as polyphenols may possess anticancer and tumor-fighting properties.

**A cornucopia of anticancer foods**  
Here are some of my favorite nutrient-dense, anticancer foods:

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long been used to improve immune function and fight tumors.

According to a 2021 *Advances in Nutrition* review of 17 cancer studies, eating 18 grams of mushrooms a day (equal to about an eighth of a cup, or two medium mushrooms) was associated with a 45% lower risk of cancer.

According to integrative oncologist Dr. Jenn Simmons, the most common medicinal mushrooms are shiitake, lion's mane, turkey tail, reishi, cordyceps and Chaga. They can help improve gut health, respiratory health, brain health, energy, sleep and detoxification. They are antibacterial, antifungal and antiviral.—DHE

**Leafy greens.** Swiss chard, lettuce, spinach and arugula are rich in antioxidants, vitamin C and beta-carotene. According to a study published in the journal *Nutrients* in 2021, increasing one's intake of leafy greens may help those with a risk of colorectal cancer.

**Cruciferous vegetables.** Cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, cabbage and broccoli are great sources of phytonutrients. Broccoli contains sulforaphane, a plant compound that, according to another study published in *Nutrients*, in 2020, may help prevent breast cancer.

**Berries.** Blueberries, raspberries and strawberries have some of the most potent antioxidant content of all produce. According to a study published in the peer-reviewed journal *Antioxidants* in 2016, berries can help reduce cancer risk in the gastrointestinal tract.

**Nuts and seeds.** These provide healthy fats and are full of antioxidants and minerals. I toss pumpkin seeds on salads and add chia seeds to my yogurt or some ground flaxseeds to a plate of grilled vegetables. In a study published in *Prostaglandins & Other Lipid Mediators* in 2019, researchers concluded that dietary flaxseed has the potential to reduce tumor growth in patients with breast cancer.

**Orange fruits and veggies.** Sweet potatoes, pumpkin and citrus contain carotenoids, including beta-carotene, an essential nutrient for immune function. A study published in the journal *Cancer Causes & Control* showed that consuming citrus fruit was associated with a lower risk of digestive and upper respiratory tract cancers.

**Herbs and spices.** My favorites include turmeric, ginger, garlic and oregano. A study published in the *European Journal of Pharmacology* discovered that allicin, a compound in garlic, can inhibit the growth of tumor cells. I like to add fresh parsley to salads, sprinkle chopped dill on avocado and grate fresh ginger into green tea for an extra antioxidant boost.

#### Small changes add up

When making changes to improve your health, remember that your diet doesn't need to be perfect to be healthy. Talk to your physician about the changes you are considering. Start with making one or two dietary modifications. A series of small changes can add up to a significant impact.

#### A super smoothie

My tips for building an inflammation-fighting smoothie? Start with two handfuls of frozen greens; I use a mixture of kale, spinach and Swiss chard. I store the bag in my freezer, so I always have a supply of frozen greens, which keeps my smoothies nice and frosty. Next, I layer in a handful of frozen berries, add five pitted dates and half a medium peeled avocado, cover with water and blend away.—DHE

