

FRESH FOODS TRUMP ANTI- CANCER FADS

Foods and supplements reported to cause or prevent cancer often make headlines.

But science favors basics over the magic bullet, according to Sarah Ellis, dietitian at Mills-Peninsula's Dorothy E. Schneider Cancer Center.



Karen Chee, M.D.

"Before scientists make recommendations, they study large groups of people for eating habits and disease patterns," she explains. "Then they isolate certain food elements and see if they can repeat the effects in the lab."

We often hear about individual studies around cancer and food, but serious recommendations are made only after scientists have gathered a large body of evidence, she says.



Sarah Ellis, R.D.

"For at least a decade, a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains has been found to be cancer protective."

Those findings have led the American Institute of Cancer Research to promote what they are calling the New American Plate – 2/3 vegetables, fruits or whole grains and 1/3 animal protein. (www.aicr.org)

Mills-Peninsula oncologist Karen Chee, M.D., agrees that it's better to focus on a balanced diet than to hop on any anti-cancer fad.

"There have been multiple studies around the use of antioxidants such as Vitamin C and E, but the results have not been conclusive," she said. "A recent study evaluating Vitamin E and prostate cancer prevention showed no benefit."

She noted that diets heavy in nitrates, which are found in processed meats, have been considered a risk factor for gastric cancer. But some studies show no positive association.

"The best approach is to exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet with lots of fruits and vegetables and don't smoke," she said.

Keeping weight in check also seems to help people avoid certain types of cancer such as breast cancer, Ellis said.



"Although it was thought that fiber was key to preventing intestinal cancers, studies that isolated fiber didn't produce the expected results."

Foods that contain fiber also contain other substances that are protective – so the emphasis moved back to produce and whole grains.

The same can be said for a variety of food components that tend to work better all together in food rather than isolated in supplements, Ellis explained.

"You hear a lot about phytochemicals these days – such as carotinoids, antioxidants and flavinoids," she said.

"There are thousands of these suspected to be linked to disease states such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease. At this point, we've identified about 150. There's a lot of speculation as to what they do for us."

Ellis recommends starting small by looking at your diet and trying to get more whole, unprocessed food as well as regular exercise.

"Rather than look for the unusual, extreme or alternative ways to prevent cancer, do the basic things," she says. "Until you do that, any kind of complementary regimen is wasted."

For more information on Mills-Peninsula's Dorothy E. Schneider Cancer Center, visit www.mills-peninsula.org/cancer.

Ellis's work at the Dorothy E. Schneider Cancer Center is made possible through a donation made by the Michael Chandler Fund. She assists people with dietary strategies to maintain weight and support the immune system throughout cancer treatment. PH