

Breast Cancer and Lifestyle: Changes That Matter

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Breast Oncology

Across the country, women often ask their physicians "What is my risk for developing breast cancer and what can I do to lower the risk?" One in eight women in the United States will be diagnosed in their lifetime and extensive research shows that a healthier lifestyle is a key component in lowering a woman's risk for developing breast cancer. These studies provide scientific evidence behind lifestyle changes a woman can make to improve her statistics. In this article we discuss interventions that are tried and true, and dispel some myths surrounding common misconceptions.

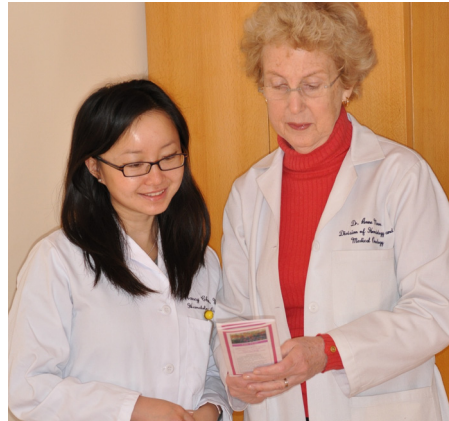
Obesity

Obesity is a multi-faceted public health enemy, infamous for inflicting millions with heart disease and diabetes related health issues each year. Obesity is also a well-known risk factor for breast cancer. Evidence from large studies have emerged to elucidate specific aspects of obesity that predispose women to breast cancer. The Women's Health Initiative (WHI) investigators found that women with high BMI (Body Mass Index greater than 30 kg/m²) have higher incidences of breast cancer than those with a normal BMI. Furthermore, obese women with breast cancer have higher risk of recurrence and cancer-related complications.

Therefore, the important questions to ask are: Does losing weight lower a woman's risk for breast cancer? Does reducing body weight after diagnosis of breast cancer improve her outcome? The answers are yes and yes.

Some of the best evidence comes from the participants of the Nurses' Health Study (NHSII) and their daughters. They were asked to report the contents of their diet from teenage years through their 20s and 30s. Women who reported high vegetable protein and high fiber diets had significantly less breast lesions.

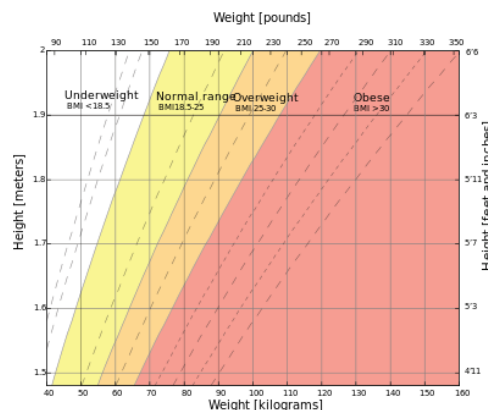
Maintaining a healthy weight doesn't just lower the risk for developing breast cancer. For women who were already diagnosed with breast cancer, the Women's Intervention Nutrition Study (WINS) found that losing about 6 pounds significantly lowered the risk of cancer recurrence. A common concern is "I was just diagnosed with cancer, is it safe and feasible



to lose weight?" This question was also addressed by multiple studies that showed women with breast cancer were able to safely lose weight and keep the weight off.

Alcohol

Alcohol is a known breast cancer carcinogen. The question is when and how much is too much? We know that the breast tissue is most sensitive to carcinogens between a woman's 1st period and 1st full term pregnancy. In the Nurses' Health Study (NHSII), women completed questionnaires about their alcohol intake in 1989



and were followed through 2009 to assess breast cancer risk. This study found that a woman's risk for developing breast cancer was significantly higher when alcohol (~more than 6 drinks a week) was consumed before her first pregnancy. The risk was also greater in women with more than 10 years between their 1st period and 1st pregnancy.

Soy: Misunderstood?

Physicians are often asked about whether specific foods are safe in breast cancer

patients. One of the most commonly asked is soy. Soy and breast cancer risk have been intensely investigated and the expert opinion is that soy is not harmful to breast cancer survivors. Therefore, there is no basis for recommending against eating soy-containing product, when it is already a normal part of the diet. Breast cancer patients need to focus on an overall healthy lifestyle, and this includes dieting in moderation.

What are researchers working on?

Researchers across the globe are working on understanding the specific links between obesity and breast cancer. Numerous clinical trials are underway to explore the benefits of weight loss in a wide range of women.

Scientists at Weill Cornell discovered that obesity is associated with inflammation, which may promote development of breast cancer and increase tumor growth. The BMIQ Healthy Lifestyles Program is an innovative study at the Weill Cornell Breast Center. This program uses a systematic approach for weight loss and was designed for breast cancer patients with BMI of greater than 27. The study groups consist of registered dietician and researchers who run regular workshops to promote weight loss.

The Future

Breast cancer is a curable disease with early detection and modern treatment. As we learn more about the interaction of lifestyle and breast cancer, we look forward to active prevention to decrease not only deaths from this disease but also the number of women affected by the disease. The future looks bright!

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Dr. Nancy Chan is the current Chief Hematology/Oncology Fellow at the New York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center. Her special interest is in breast cancer research and is working on clinical trials aimed to reduce breast cancer recurrence.