

Food Cancer's Culinary Concerns.

'You are what you eat', was never more true than in the connection between food and cancer. Cancer has increasingly been identified as a "life-style" disease. Scientists are agreed that cancers are linked to where you live, to what you eat and drink, and breathe and smoke. Cumulative impacts of the toxins in our systems lead to, or impact, diseases such as cancer.

Diet is now being considered a major weapon in the fight against cancer. A full 40% of all cancers are thought to be caused by faulty diet and life-style. Together with low physical activity, this translates globally to about 3-4 million cancer cases per annum, which can be prevented by healthy eating. Cancers of the gastro-intestinal and respiratory tract, stomach and lung are primarily linked to diet. An intake that is high in fruit and vegetables and the micronutrients, vitamins and minerals they contain, may prevent 20-30% of lung cancers in both smokers and non-smokers. Nearly 60-70% of stomach cancers can be prevented by diet high in fruit and vegetables, together with life style changes such as low consumption of alcohol, greater physical activity, and simple hygienic practice such as washing of hands before eating. Evidence is less strong, but still convincing for cancers of the pharynx and esophagus. If alcohol was eliminated, up to 50% of cancers of the mouth and pharynx could also be prevented. Fat is identified as a culprit in cancers of the colon and rectum, as well as in Breast cancer. Thus an awareness and understanding of what goes into our mouths is imperative.

Food habits in India have changed dramatically in the last half-century. Even as recently as the 1940's, wheat and rice were milled by hand. The housewife got excellent exercise of abdominal and arm muscles, and the resultant flour was rich in fibre. Rice cleaned at home, still retained a measure of husk. Gradually, flour began to be milled by electric grinders, and over a period of time has become almost indistinguishable from cake flour or maida. (In the old days this was disparagingly called "American flour" and recognised as merely empty calories). The element of fibre has become progressively lower, as we demand 'white' roti at home, and 'white' polished rice, whose nutrients have been totally removed.

Consider an average urban Indian diet on any given day and you will realise the amount of maida we consume: A slice or two of toast for breakfast; a mid morning biscuit with your cup of coffee or even a slice of cake; a sandwich for lunch and perhaps the odd hamburger; another biscuit at tea time, and a pizza for dinner? Or perhaps a meal of noodles? Or could it be a Kathi roll, "Loochi"(the Bengali maida puri) and alu sabzi? Each one of these foods is made of maida. And remember, maida as a food is always leavened with fat. Butter on your toast, in the biscuits and cake, in your hamburger bun and pizza base. Now try this little experiment: pour the amount of maida that you eat in a day down your kitchen sink, together with the approximate fat that goes into those foods. How long before your sink drainage gets clogged? You can pour hot water to clear the drain, even add a package of Drainex. A few energetic jerks of the plunger, and presto the drain is clear! But, what would you put down your throat to clear the guk clogging your stomach and intestines?

A diet rich in roughage is as effective as a packet of Drainex. Fibre is an essential ingredient in healthy eating. A diet rich in roughage is a safeguard against cancers of the gut. Some high fibre

foods are brown rice, wheat, cereal, popcorn, raisins, peaches, apples, oranges, potatoes with their skin and all green vegetables. Seasonal fruit and vegetable are Nature's gift to the discerning foodie.

Choosing foods rich in Vitamin A will protect you against cancers of the esophagus, larynx, mouth, stomach, colon and rectum. These are found in dairy foods, egg yolk, fish, liver, fresh fruit and vegetable. It is far better to eat these foods than pop vitamin pills

Lets go back to traditional diets that mandated one or more cooked vegetable with a meat or fish dish in non vegetarian homes, a grated or julienne raw vegetable(lachha/kachumbar), a dal and dahi with your chapati or rice. Vegetarians left out the meat, while the rest of the meal remained the same. Desserts were saved for festivals, and fruit, either fresh or dried, followed the meal. Our ancestors had some great ideas. They introduced fibre into the meal in the form of vegetable and fruit. They introduced milk in its more easily digestible form of dahi or paneer. That was a smarter and healthier way to eat. In today's stressful life, a complete meal is a rare event. But even for the harried working woman, simply adding an apple or guava, a small salad to the hamburger/pizza would make the fast meal more healthy and fibre packed. Whole fruit as a snack is healthier than a juice since the juice has little or no fibre. It is certainly more nourishing than a sugar-laden biscuit or cake.

America is high on a "Five-a-day" diet. Americans are finally realising that it is not just meat that will give them good health, but the greater consumption of fruit and vegetables. The "five" include one medium sized whole fruit, a 6oz cup of fresh fruit or vegetable juice, ½ cup of cooked vegetables, ½ cup of lentils (daal, chana, rajma), 1 cup of raw leafy vegetables (salad), and ¼ cup of dry fruit or nuts. Does this sound familiar?

Green vegetables are available through the year, and despite Popeye's assertions, it is the lowly chowlai that is richer in iron than spinach! Come winter and markets are bursting with mustard greens (sarson ka saag), Bathua (a partner green growing in wheat fields) and Fenugreek greens (methi saag), all of them a reservoir of the goodness of iron, vitamins and fibre. Mint and coriander in chutneys too; there are so many tasty ways to healthy eating. These greens balance the acid residues of sugar, fried foods and meat. (The chutney accompaniment to kebabs and samosa is no accident!) They also provide much needed fibre to facilitate the passage of food through the digestive tract.

Cruciferous vegetables of the cabbage family- cabbage, cauliflower, Brussel sprouts and broccoli, as well as Chinese and Red cabbage, have a potent anti-cancer property. Onion and garlic too have over 25 compounds that have been identified for their anti-cancer activity. Soya beans have been identified as a growth inhibitor for cancer cells. They contain phyto-estrogens, which slow or negate the growth of estrogen/ hormone related cancers. Soya also helps neutralise nitrosamines implicated in liver cancers. Shitake mushrooms are also known to contain enzymes, which build up immunity.

Cooking style make a difference too. Cut vegetables left for long in water, lose their vitamin content. Steaming or light braising are more healthy than frying. Cover food being cooked, and do not reheat food over and over, or food will lose its value. Avoid adding salt to food at table. Avoid drinking tea with your meal. The tannin prevents absorption of minerals in the food. A

drink of herbal or green tea would be a better alternative. Carbonated drinks too are not advised as accompaniments to meals.

Yellow or orange fruit containing carotene and large quantities of Vitamin A combat cancer causing agents in the body. These would include papaya, mango, carrots, and melon. Citrus fruit such as oranges, sweet limes and lemon are rich source of Vitamin C. Lycopene is found in tomatoes, and is not destroyed by cooking. It acts as a scavenger in mopping up free radicals in the body. It is thought to be a preventive food in Prostate cancer.

Growing prosperity brings changes in food intake. Fat in the diet increases, as does intake of sugar. Both foods are implicated in many diseases other than cancer. Indian hospitality too dictates that additional spoonful of oil/ghee in the meal when guests are expected. We would do our guests and ourselves a great favour by concentrating on a low fat, yet tasty menu. A high fat diet increases your risk of colon and prostate cancers. Cancer of the Gall Bladder has grown alarmingly in North India, and is directly linked to the increasing fat content in the diet. A high fat diet is also implicated in the rising numbers of urban Indian women who present with Breast cancer. Fat loaded calories mean weight gain, especially when working men and women spend long hours sitting down, with no exercise. It is, however, dangerous to undertake a no fat diet. Some fat is necessary in everyone's diet. Another sensible precaution that can easily be followed is to throw away oil that has become viscous and discoloured by repeated frying. Over-used oil contains many carcinogens.

Cut back on pickled and highly spiced foods. Processed and tinned foods are high in salt or in fat. Barbecued and salt-cured foods are also a cause for concern. Japan, which uses a great deal of salt cured fish and meat also has the highest incidence of stomach cancer. Balance that daily rasher of bacon with a piece of fruit. Does this mean we eschew all the fun of a barbecue? Not at all. It is easy to take steps that make the food healthy. Marinades, especially with a flake of garlic, tenderise the meat, as does microwave cooking before barbecuing. Avoid charred meats. Add a selection of salads, nuts and dry fruit that satisfy pangs of hunger while the meats cook.

Sea fish is a particularly healthy food. The selenium in fish is an excellent anti-cancer food. White meats such as chicken are more healthy than red meats, but it is good to remove the skin of chicken before cooking. Those kebabs will taste even better if you bought whole chunks of meat and had it minced before your eyes. Ready-made mince is loaded with avoidable fat, which does neither the kebabs nor your waistline much good.

Finally, drink lots of water, in addition to any other fluid you may consume. Clean water, an increasingly difficult commodity, is truly the elixir of life. Don't forget the joy of exercise and of fun. An annual screening to ensure all is well....and Happy eating!