

## Reducing your risk of bowel cancer



**This information sheet is about reducing your risk of bowel cancer. It is based on research evidence and has been written for the general public.**

Bowel cancer, also called colorectal cancer, is one of the most common cancers in New Zealand. New Zealand has one of the highest rates of this type of cancer in the world. One of the reasons for this is because of what we eat and drink, and our lifestyles.

The World Cancer Research Fund has studied research on bowel cancer from all around the world and decided there is more convincing evidence that bowel cancer is more common in people who eat a lot of red and processed meats. There is also strong evidence bowel cancer is related to drinking alcohol and being overweight. Eating a lot of high fibre foods and getting regular physical activity seems to reduce the risk of developing bowel cancer.

### Key Messages

There are clear signs that what you eat and drink and how active you are makes a difference to how likely you are to get bowel cancer. To reduce your risk of developing bowel cancer the Cancer Society recommends you should:

- Eat small servings of red meat only three to four times a week.
- Avoid processed meat.
- Avoid or limit alcohol.
- Eat mostly plant foods (vegetables, fruit, grain and pulses)
- If you are overweight try to lose weight and if you are at a healthy weight try to maintain that weight.
- Do 60 minutes of physical activity at least five times a week.

### Red meat

The link between red meat and processed meats and bowel cancer is strong. In countries where people eat a lot of meat, like New Zealand, bowel cancer rates

are high. Rates are lower in countries where less meat is eaten.

There are a number of different ways in which red meat can increase the risk of bowel cancer.

Red meat includes beef, lamb, pork and veal. While these meats are valuable sources of protein, iron, zinc and vitamin B12, they also contain some chemicals which, when broken down in the bowel, seem to damage the cells and make cancer more likely to develop.

Other chemicals, which can damage cells of the gut, are also formed when meat is cooked at high temperatures, especially if it is charred or burnt when it is roasted, grilled or barbequed.

Red meat may also add to the risk of getting bowel cancer because of its fat content.

Another way in which red meat can increase the risk of bowel cancer is because people who eat a lot of meat tend to eat fewer of the foods, like wholegrain cereals and fruit and vegetables that can reduce the risk of bowel and other types of cancers.

These plant-based foods also make it easier to lose and/or maintain a healthy weight.

Other sources of protein such as chicken, fish, beans, peas and lentils are not linked with an increased risk of bowel cancer. Use them to replace red meat in meals. Beans and pulses are especially good as they contain high levels of fibre.

**The Cancer Society recommends you eat small servings of red meat, 65 to 100g no more than three or four times a week.**

To make sure you are choosing small enough portions, until you get used to what a 65 to 100g serving looks like, either weigh it or divide up what you buy into portions (for example divide 400g into five equal portions or 500g into six portions). The suggested amount is about half a cup of mince, two small chops or two slices of roast meat.

## Processed meats

Processed meats, including bacon, ham, corned meats, sausages, frankfurters, salami and pastrami, are even more strongly linked to bowel cancer than red meat. These processed meats usually have a lot of fat and salt and nitrogen-based preservatives; all of which can damage cells in the gut. These meats are also often smoked. Smoke contains chemicals which are known to cause cancer in cells.

**The Cancer Society recommends processed meats should not be a regular or normal part of your diet and that you try to avoid eating them. If you choose to eat them have only small amounts once in a while.**

## Alcohol

Research shows that people who have four drinks a day have a 40 percent higher chance of developing bowel cancer than people who do not drink at all and the evidence that alcohol causes bowel cancer is described as convincing. Although the evidence is strong for both men and women, men who drink alcohol seem to be at slightly more risk of developing bowel cancer than women.

In terms of cancer, generally, there is no safe level of alcohol and studies show that the more you drink, and the more regularly you drink, the higher the risk of developing cancer. Drinking and smoking together increases your risk as the combined effects are much greater than just smoking or just drinking alcohol.

Alcoholic drinks are high in energy and adding sweetened mixers, like soft drinks, adds more energy again. Alcoholic drinks contain no useful nutrients and add to the chance of you gaining weight.

**The Cancer Society recommends that if you drink alcohol at all, men should have no more than two standard drinks a day, and women one, and no more than four standard drinks on any single occasion of drinking.**

## Fibre

Bowel cancer is less common in people who eat a lot of fibre and more common in those who eat little fibre. You can include fibre in your meals by eating wholegrain cereals, fruit and vegetables and other plant foods such as beans, peas, lentils, seed and nuts. You can use these foods to replace red and processed meat in your meals.

**The Cancer Society recommends you make plant-based foods – wholegrain cereals, fruit and vegetables, beans, peas, lentils, seeds and nuts the main part of each meal every day and use them to replace red and processed meats.**

## Healthy weight

Being overweight increases the risk not only of bowel cancer but many other types of cancer.

To maintain a healthy body weight you need to balance the energy you get from food and drinks with the energy you use up in physical activity. Even if you are not overweight you need to be aware of balancing the energy you eat with how much you use up in activity to stay at a healthy weight.

Weight loss is more likely to be successful and lasting if you make steady, slow and practical changes which improve the way you eat and increase physical activity everyday. Avoid crash or fad diets and exercise binges – they don't work long term and often result in greater weight gain after you stop them. Look for steady and slow changes that help you to maintain ongoing weight loss.

**The Cancer Society recommends you try to lose weight if you are overweight and try to maintain a healthy weight.**