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# Gynecologic Cancer



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Each year, about 72,000 women in the United States are newly diagnosed with gynecologic cancer. Gynecologic cancer is any cancer that starts in a woman's reproductive organs such as cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal and vulvar cancers. There are some factors that make a woman more likely to get gynecologic cancer including older age and family history of cancer; these risk factors cannot be modified. On the other hand, some factors that make a person more likely to get gynecologic cancer can be changed such as diet, smoking, having unprotected sex, inactivity, and being overweight or obese. Treatment for gynecologic cancer can include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, or a combination of these. All women are at risk for gynecologic cancer, but ongoing research shows that achieving and maintaining the proper weight, eating a balanced diet, and getting regular exercise can both lessen the risk of getting gynecologic cancer and also help keep you strong during cancer treatment.

## Eating Well During Your Cancer Treatment

To lessen the risk for gynecologic cancer, it is important to keep a healthy weight by choosing the right foods and exercising regularly. Healthy diets rich in colorful fruits and vegetables, high in dietary fiber, and lower in salt, sugar and animal products are the key to fighting gynecologic cancer. Also, choosing the right balance of foods for each meal can help your body to work at its best. Think of the plate below when choosing portions of different foods for each meal:

In addition to making wise food choices to reduce cancer risk, it is also important to maintain good nutrition while you are getting cancer treatment. Staying well nourished can help to improve the outcome of your treatment. However, sometimes surgery, chemotherapy or radiation can have side effects which can make it difficult to eat. Some eating problems you can experience during cancer treatment include loss of appetite, taste changes, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea, or constipation. For tips on managing these symptoms, please refer to our "Cancer Fact Sheet."

Also, choose foods moderate or low in **sugar**. Research has not shown a direct role of sugar in gynecologic cancer, but it is still smart to limit added sugar in your diet because of other health concerns such as overweight/obesity. The easiest way to make sure foods are low in sugar is by reading the ingredient label. Ingredients are always listed in descending order. This means that ingredients at the beginning of the list are present in the greatest quantities. However, reading food labels can be tricky because sugar is listed in many ways. Some other names for sugar are: corn syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, fruit juice concentrate, cane sugar, brown rice syrup, fructose, glucose, dextrose, maltose and sucrose. No matter what it is called, sugar is sugar whether it is brown, white or powdered. Honey, agave and maple syrup are also sugars. If you are trying to limit your sugars, just make sure these names do not appear towards the top of the ingredients list.

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### For more information:

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## Vegetables and Fruits

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Vegetables and fruits are an important part of each meal. When planning your meals and snacks, aim for at least 4-6 vegetables and 3-5 fruits per day. These foods are high in anti-oxidants and phytochemicals, which are compounds that can help fight against harmful substances that damage the body's cells. They are also an excellent source of dietary fiber, which helps to maintain a healthy digestive tract, support the immune system and keep your bowel movements regular. For vegetables, choose a variety of colors such as dark green, orange, yellow and red. Also, pick non-starchy options like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, peppers, tomatoes, and leafy greens (kale, collards, lettuce and spinach). For fruits, colorful, whole fruits such as berries, apples, pears and oranges are best. Fruits can be found either fresh or frozen depending on the time of year. If you choose canned options, look for fruits canned in water instead of in syrup.

## Carbohydrates

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This section of the plate is composed of grains, starchy vegetables, and legumes. These high-carbohydrate foods provide the energy the body needs to get through the day. The best carbohydrate foods are nutrient-dense, like starchy vegetables (squash, corn, potatoes, peas), whole wheat bread or pasta, brown rice, quinoa, and high-fiber cereals. Legumes round out the top choices in this category. Two cups of these healthy carbohydrates will help you get your recommended 25-35 grams of fiber per day, which can reduce the risk of some types of cancers. Remember, when filling this part of your plate, choose fewer empty-calorie, or non-nutritious, carbohydrates such as cookies, cake and white bread or white rice.

## Protein

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The remainder of your plate includes protein foods. Some of the best choices are chicken or turkey without the skin, fish, eggs, nuts, tofu, beans and dairy products (e.g. milk, yogurt, cheese). Protein is important because it helps to build muscle, skin and bones and also helps to repair tissue. When choosing your protein foods, limit portions of high-fat animal protein like whole milk, full-fat cheese, red meat and pork. Choose fewer red meats, as current research suggests diets high in red meat are linked to certain cancers and heart disease. Also, choose leaner cuts of meats to reduce fat content. Although deli-meats are also high in protein, they are not recommended due to their high salt and fat content, as well as chemical preservatives.

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## Fats



As you design your healthy diet, it is also important to pay attention to fat. There are both healthy and unhealthy fats. On the unhealthy side, saturated fats dominate. They are found in animal products like butter, cream, red meat, whole milk, and cheese. Another unhealthy fat is trans-fat (also called “partially hydrogenated oil”). While trans-fats are being phased out of the American diet, they are currently still found in many margarines, Crisco and commercially baked goods like crackers, muffins, cookies, cakes and doughnuts. Healthy fats, the unsaturated fats, are found in olive oil, nuts, seeds and fish. Omega-3 fats are particularly recommended because they help reduce inflammation in the body and prevent heart disease. Foods rich in Omega-3’s include salmon, tuna, sardines, cod, flax seeds, walnuts, olive oil and canola oil. It is important to keep in mind all fats are high in calories.

## The New American Plate



*Nearly two-thirds of your plate should be made up of vegetables, fruit and whole grains. One third or less should be animal proteins.*

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## Current Research About Lifestyle and Gynecologic Cancer

Research about lifestyle and gynecologic cancer is constantly evolving. The following are summaries of some of the most active areas under investigation.

### **Maintaining a Healthy Weight**

Current research demonstrates that women who are overweight or obese and those who gain weight quickly are at increased risk for gynecologic cancers. This is another reason why it is important to reach a healthy weight with a balanced diet, by choosing nutrient-rich foods and by getting daily exercise.

### **Phytochemicals**

These compounds are found in fruits, vegetables and teas that may fight gynecologic cancer. Phytochemicals may prevent damage to DNA (the genetic material in cells), prevent cancer cell growth, boost immune function, and reduce inflammation. Some specific foods high in phytochemicals are carrots, sweet potatoes, spinach, kale, broccoli, cabbage, eggplant, bell peppers, tomatoes, melon, oranges, tangerines and green tea. The best way to get these helpful compounds is from a variety of plant foods every day. Scientific studies have not been able to demonstrate if taking phytochemicals as supplements is safe or effective.

### **Soy**

The controversy over soy stems from the fact that it contains isoflavones. Because this compound resembles the hormone estrogen, it was suspected that eating isoflavone-rich foods could increase the risk of hormonally-sensitive cancers, including gynecological cancers. However, early studies supporting this theory were performed on rodents, which metabolize soy differently than humans. In fact, current research on human populations suggests that a moderate amount (one to three servings daily) of soy *foods* such as tofu, tempeh, soy beans or soy milk appear safe for both cancer survivors and the general population. Some research also indicates that it may even protect against cancer. However, soy pills and soy dietary supplements should be avoided until more research is done.

### **Milk**

Another area of investigation is a possible link between milk and ovarian cancer. Both lactose and insulin-like growth factor, natural components of milk, were targeted as potentially affecting the ovaries. To date, the evidence is mixed, with at least one study showing reduced risk and one increased risk. Most studies, in fact, showed no association between dairy foods and ovarian cancer. This is certainly an area that needs further research.

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