

GUIDANCE ON 'COMPLEMENTARY' & 'ALTERNATIVE' DIETS FOR CANCER

There has been much interest over recent years in 'diets for cancer'. However, so much information is available in the press and on the internet describing diets which aim to cure or control cancer, that it can become very confusing.

Many people wish to alter their diet following a diagnosis of cancer. This leaflet aims to answer some commonly asked questions.

What are 'Complementary' and 'Alternative' diets?

'Complementary' Diets may be used *in addition* to conventional cancer treatments. Some advise avoiding certain foods or groups of foods, others recommend large intakes of particular foods. Additional vitamins, minerals or other types of supplements can be recommended.

If you are considering following a complementary diet, speak to your consultant or nurse about a referral to the dietitian. Some of these diets can be difficult to follow and may compromise your health and well-being. Following these may be time consuming and sometimes very expensive. They may have a significant effect on lifestyle if eating out and attending social functions becomes problematic. Some diets are low in energy (calories) which can cause weight loss, particularly if appetite is poor. In addition they can lead to nutritional deficiencies, e.g. of iron (causing anaemia) or calcium (causing osteoporosis or 'brittle bones').

The dietitian can discuss the different diets and also provide advice on ensuring your dietary intake is well balanced and providing sufficient calories. Maintaining your weight during cancer treatment is very important. Research shows that weight maintenance is linked with better outcomes, as delays in treatment or reduction of chemotherapy doses are less likely.

'Alternative' Diets claim to cure cancer on their own and are believed to be an alternative to conventional treatments. These are not recommended.

What about organic foods?

Organic foods are grown without the use of synthetic chemicals such as pesticides and fertilisers, the residues of which some people consider harmful. Farmers can still use chemicals but there is guidance on which ones are allowed. Eating organic foods is often recommended after a cancer diagnosis. Research shows that organic fruit and vegetables

contain the same levels of nutrients as non organic fruit and vegetables. Organic foods are often much more expensive to buy.

Do I need a vitamin or mineral supplement?

If your appetite is good and you are eating a varied diet, there is no need for additional vitamins or minerals. If your appetite is poor, you may consider a one-a-day multivitamin and mineral supplement. Never exceed the recommended daily amount as very high doses of some vitamins may be harmful or interfere with cancer treatments.

There is no evidence at present that taking extra vitamins or minerals as supplements can cure or control cancer.

What about herbal remedies?

It is very important that you discuss any herbal products you are taking, or considering taking, with your consultant or specialist nurse. Some of these products have side effects or may interfere with medications you are prescribed. In addition, many products available over the internet are not regulated and will not have been subject to safety testing.

What if I'm already on a diet for another condition?

If you are following a diet for another condition, e.g. diet for diabetes, gluten free diet or cholesterol lowering diet it is important that you see the dietitian before making any changes to your current diet, or if your appetite is poor. Ask your consultant or nurse to refer you.

What is the difference between a dietitian and a nutritionist?

Registered Dietitians are regulated by law and are governed by an ethical code to ensure that they are competent to practice. Dietitians give advice that is based on scientific evidence.

Nutritionists and nutritional therapists are not regulated by law and levels of training vary.

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