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Supportive Cancer Care

Nourishing Yourself During Cancer: Simple, Practical Nutrition That Supports Healing

By Laura Kalina, RD, MAdEd, Registered Dietitian with Inspire Health

When facing a cancer diagnosis, nutrition can feel confusing and overwhelming. Many people are exposed to conflicting messages about "superfoods," supplements, and foods to avoid. As a registered dietitian with InspireHealth, I often see individuals feeling unsure about what truly supports their health. The good news is that nutrition for cancer does not need to be complicated—it can be simple, balanced, and enjoyable.

At its core, a nourishing diet during and after cancer treatment focuses on whole, minimally processed foods that provide steady energy and key nutrients. Vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, and lean protein sources form the foundation. These foods provide fibre, vitamins, minerals, and a wide range of phytochemicals that help modulate inflammation, support immune function, and contribute to cellular repair and resilience.

A dietary pattern that emphasizes plant-based foods is particularly beneficial. Diets rich in plant foods are associated with improved overall health outcomes, in part due to their high content of fibre and bioactive compounds such as polyphenols and carotenoids. These compounds play a role in reducing oxidative stress and supporting metabolic and immune pathways that are important during and after cancer treatment. Importantly, a plant-based approach does not have to mean eliminating animal foods—it can simply mean shifting the balance so that plants make up the majority of your plate.

One of the most important principles is balance. Rather than eliminating entire food groups or following restrictive plans, aim to build meals that include a combination of protein, healthy fats, and high-fibre carbohydrates. This helps stabilize blood sugar levels, maintain energy, and support muscle mass—especially important during treatment and recovery. Including protein at meals and snacks, whether from plant sources like beans, lentils, tofu, and nuts, or from animal sources such as fish, eggs, or poultry, supports tissue repair and immune function.

Another key area of emerging research is the gut microbiome—the trillions of microorganisms that live in our digestive tract. A diverse and balanced microbiome plays an important role in digestion, immune regulation, and even response to cancer therapies. Diet is one of the most powerful ways to influence the microbiome. Fibre from plant foods acts as a prebiotic, feeding beneficial gut bacteria. When these bacteria ferment fibre, they produce short-chain fatty acids such as butyrate, which help maintain the integrity of the gut lining and have anti-inflammatory effects.

In addition to fibre-rich foods, fermented foods can be a helpful way to support microbial diversity. Foods such as yogurt with live cultures, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, miso, and tempeh contain beneficial bacteria that may support gut health. While they are not a replacement for a high-fibre diet, incorporating small, regular amounts can be a simple and flavorful way to complement overall nutrition and support digestive function.

There is a great deal of concern about specific foods such as soy or supplement use. Current evidence supports that moderate intake of whole foods such as tofu, edamame, and tempeh is safe and can be part of a healthy diet for most individuals with a history of breast cancer. In fact, these foods provide high-quality protein along with fibre and phytonutrients.

Another key aspect of supportive nutrition is enjoyment. Food is not just fuel—it plays an important role in culture, family, and pleasure. Many of my clients feel guilt or stress around eating, especially after a cancer diagnosis. It's important to remember that nourishing yourself includes both nutrient-dense choices and flexibility. Small, sustainable changes often have the greatest impact.

One easy and delicious way to increase nutrient intake—especially in the summer months—is by building vibrant, satisfying salads. By combining leafy greens, colourful vegetables, whole grains, and protein sources such as beans, chicken, or tofu, salads can become complete, balanced meals.

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Adding a homemade dressing is a simple way to enhance flavour while incorporating healthy fats that help with the absorption of fat-soluble nutrients.

If you'd like to learn how to create nourishing, flavourful meals in a supportive and interactive setting, I invite you to join an upcoming cooking workshop:

📍 In person in Kamloops + Online
📅 Monthly on the Second Tuesday
⏰ 11:00 AM

In my nutrition workshops, we'll explore how to build balanced meals, prepare versatile homemade sauces and dressings, and discuss simple nutrition strategies you can use every day. Whether you're in treatment, recovery, or looking to support long-term health, this session is designed to give you practical tools and confidence in the kitchen.

You can find details and register through Inspirehealth.ca.

I look forward to cooking—and learning—together!