

My Microbiome and Me: Cancer Prevention

BY DR. WENDY ROGERS

Last month's article discussed a GI disorder called small intestinal bacterial overgrowth. A few months prior the topic was gut bacteria and its impact on weight and overall health. If you haven't noticed by now, naturopathic doctors tend to be more than a little obsessed with gut health and for very good reason. Current research is showing the critical nature of the health of the GI tract and our overall health, impacting everything from our weight to our quality of sleep to our risk for multiple diseases, including cancer. I share this obsession with my colleagues but also have a special interest in cancer prevention and supportive cancer care. Cancer continues to be the second most common cause of death in the United States, representing nearly 1 of every 4 deaths. If we can focus on the health of our GI microbiome, we have the potential to positively change these statistics, decreasing overall cancer risk and death.

Let's first do a quick review of the GI microbiome which is a fancy term for the gut bacteria that predominately live in the large intestine. It's a complicated ecosystem containing thousands of microorganisms, primarily different species and strains of bacteria. In a healthy person, there are mostly beneficial bacteria helping us do a multitude of critical tasks including absorbing nutrients, processing and eliminating toxins, and maintaining a healthy immune system. Unfortunately, it's common for pathogenic bacteria to also exist due to many things including the use

of antibiotics and other medications like stomach acid blockers, intestinal illnesses, chemicals in our food and poor dietary choices. These pathogenic or illness producing bacteria are where the trouble begins.

Here are just a few ways in which an unhealthy gut impacts our risk for cancer:

Inflammation: Scientific studies have made it abundantly clear that chronic inflammation is a major reason for the development of cancer. Now research is also beginning to show that chronic inflammation can lead to a disruption of the healthy gut bacteria. And an increase in various strains of "bad" gut bacteria causes chronic inflammation. It becomes a chicken or the egg scenario but without improving the health of the microbiome, inflammation will continue and the risk of cancer increases.

Hormones: An unhealthy gut environment impacts how hormones are processed, in particular estrogen. This leads to a re-circulation of estrogens into the blood stream that normally would have been eliminated. The resulting increase in estrogen raises the risks for cancers such as breast, uterine, ovarian, and prostate.

Immune system: Up to 80% of our immune system resides in our gut. Without a healthy GI environment, this system designed to protect us breaks down and is unable to do its job as

well. The primary way we fight and eliminate cancer cells is via our immune system so lowered immunity = higher cancer risk.

Sadly most of us have had antibiotics at least once if not multiple times in our lives, a nasty gut bug or two, and/or made some poor food choices which means the microbiome has been disrupted with the good guys being killed off. Despite this, all is not lost. There are things we can do to encourage and re-develop a healthy environment for our gut bacteria and in turn ourselves.

Take a daily probiotic. This is replenishment with the healthy bacteria, changing the environment so they "dominate the pack" vs. the bad bacteria having all the control. This can also be accomplished by including fermented foods into your daily diet such as sauerkraut, kimchi, kefir, and/or kombucha.

Increase the fiber in your diet. The average American often consumes less than 1/2 of the recommended daily fiber intake. This is best accomplished by having a diet high in various plant foods, especially vegetables. This not only serves to prevent constipation but allows for the development of diverse, beneficial gut bacteria while decreasing the survival of pathogenic bacteria.

It's also critical to avoid processed food as part of the daily diet as this will only serve to drive



the inflammatory process. Remember as I've said many times before, you really are what you eat. If you choose to eat chemical-laden food, these "foods" are going to cause damage. There are many diet options and trends out there but the most important thing to remember is to eat whole, real food that doesn't come in a package.

If you have concerns about the health of your GI, are interested in cancer prevention or supportive cancer care, the doctors of True Health Medicine, PC are here to assist you.



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