The Best and Worst Foods to Eat During Breast Cancer Treatment

by ALISON RICHARDS

Breast Cancer Diet

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I was not given much information about the types of foods I should be eating and what I should avoid. Or maybe it was buried in the mound of leaflets and booklets they gave me; I am not sure. I had previously been at the peak of fitness and health (or so I thought!) and was eating a nutritious diet. But that seemed to go by the wayside with my diagnosis. When something life-changing happens, like cancer, your mind is busy with thoughts about what will happen to you, and fears for the future, so thinking about what to eat can be a low priority. You'll maybe grab something convenient, or gorge on the mountains of chocolates that your loved ones give you to cheer you up. But maintaining a proper breast cancer diet is important.

Like many other ladies going through breast cancer treatment, I actually gained weight. It's very common and in hindsight I wish I had taken more care of my diet, so hopefully the tips below will help those who are newly diagnosed or are going through treatment currently.

What is Breast Cancer?

Breast cancer, like all cancers, occurs when abnormal cells divide in an uncontrollable manner. The cells can be in various areas of the breast, but usually affect the ducts where milk is produced or in the lobules which form glandular tissue.

What Are the Common Symptoms of Breast Cancer?

The most common symptom of breast cancer is a lump in the breast. However, other changes are also symptoms, such as inverted nipples, a discharge or bleeding from the breast, a rash or any other changes to the breast, armpit or collarbone. It's vital to report any changes so self-examination is key. I have previously written about how to do a breast examination and what to look for, and this should ideally be done monthly.

What is the Best Diet for Breast Cancer Patients?

While there is no scientific evidence that adopting a special diet or eating certain foods will prevent cancer returning, a healthy eating plan will give your body the best chance of dealing with the treatment phase. You will need energy on the days you feel low or fatigued, and plenty of nutritious food to boost your immune system when going through chemotherapy.

A healthy diet includes the following:

- Lots of vegetables, ideally a variety of colors to maximize the different vitamins and minerals you need.
- Plenty of fruit, ideally two servings per day.
- Legumes such as nuts, seeds, beans and lentils.
- Wholegrain cereals including bread, rice, pasta and noodles.

- Lean fish, poultry and meat, limiting red meat consumption if possible.
- Other healthy protein sources, such as eggs and tofu.
- Dairy foods including milk, yoghurt and cheese, but be careful of the high fat versions.
- Lots of water, ideally at least 2 liters per day.

What Are the Worst Foods to Eat During Breast Cancer Treatment?

You should always check with your medical team about foods to avoid, because everyone's treatment plan is different. However, there are some general tips which are below:

- Avoid alcohol as much as possible, although it is fine to have an occasional glass of wine.
- Grapefruit can affect how many drugs act within the body, so you should check with your doctor or avoid this fruit.
- Avoid foods that are high in sugar, as these are more likely to affect weight gain.
- Avoid unpasteurized milk, vegetables, and other dairy products. Unpasteurized food could contain harmful bacteria which makes your chances of getting ill greater when your immunity is low.
- You may be told to avoid runny eggs, raw seafood, and buffets where you cannot be certain how long the food has been out. I was also told to avoid takeaways for the same reason, but you should check with your medical team if you are not sure.

During chemotherapy when your immune system is compromised you need to be really careful about food hygiene. Make sure you follow a good handwashing regime and store foods correctly, keeping raw and cooked meat separate. Also, be careful when using chopping boards, ensuring that raw meat and fish are prepared separately from cooked meat or vegetables.

Be careful when reheating, as food must be cooked right through so that it is piping hot. Otherwise, it may encourage bacteria to form which can make you really ill.

What Are the Best Foods to Eat During Breast Cancer Treatment?

Examples of really good foods to eat during breast cancer treatments include the following:

- Leafy green vegetables such as broccoli, kale, spinach and cabbage.
- Protein-rich foods are great, and ideal for snacking, to help your body repair and support the immune system. Nuts, chicken bites, hardboiled eggs, low fat yoghurt and cheese with crackers are good examples.
- Eat whole grains, so the whole wheat or whole grain versions of your everyday staples. Brown or granary/seeded bread is both delicious and healthy. Brown rice, whole wheat pasta and noodles are also better than their more processed counterparts.
- Herbal teas can be helpful if you are not feeling 100%, such as ginger or mint tea.

What Are the Best Tips for Maintaining a Balanced Diet While Having Cancer?

If you are tired from breast cancer treatment, then accept any offers of help, and ask friends and family to make you healthy meals and snacks. They often feel helpless, so making you something nice to eat will probably be welcomed. For example, a lovely homemade fruit salad is perfect for when you are going through chemotherapy and your taste buds have changed.

Take advantage of online shopping to pick healthy foods when you are short of time or do not want to leave the house. If you have a local deli or restaurant which offers a delivery service, then treat yourself with something which is both delicious and healthy.

Food does not have to be fresh to be healthy, and frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables are ideal to have on standby. Batch cook some healthy meals while you are feeling well and then freeze them for when you cannot face cooking.

Soups can be frozen too and are ideal for getting fiber into your diet. They can include lentils, beans, and vegetables, which all help to prevent constipation.

If you are not feeling well, then try and have four or five small meals rather than three big ones. These will maintain energy levels and help reduce fatigue.
If you are suffering from mouth ulcers during chemotherapy, then avoid citrus foods as they can sting! Soft foods are usually the easiest to eat, such as soups or drink a nutritious smoothie through a straw.

If your appetite has increased due to taking steroids then try not to fill up on high calorie foods for your breast cancer diet. Stick to lean protein, colorful vegetables and wholegrain carbs, and watch your portion sizes. If you are drinking a lot then that will help keep you full too.