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Fish Fat and Cancer

Fish fat is good for you. Haven't heard it put quite that way before? We use terms such as high omega-3 fatty acids and fish oil, but at the end of the day, it's a fat from fish. But this is one fat you need whether you eat fish or take a fish-oil supplement. I'm not giving away any secrets from the *Heart Health Webinar* when I tell you it's good for your heart, brain, eyes, joints—pick a body part and it's probably going to help. But until this past week, it hasn't been talked about much for reducing the risk of cancer. I'll review the recent study and explain why it might be good for that as well. I'll also tell you what else researchers found.

The Study

The VITamins And Lifestyle (VITAL) Cohort is a study of the association of dietary supplement use with cancer risk. A total of 77,738 men and women 50 to 76 in western Washington State were enrolled in the study in 2000 to 2002. To qualify, they had to complete a detailed questionnaire on supplement use, diet, and other cancer risk factors. The most recent report from that study focused on the risk of supplement use and breast cancer in over 35,000 female participants (1).

What researchers found was that regular use of fish-oil supplements at the beginning of the study was associated with a 32% reduced risk of invasive breast cancer over the next eight years. In commentary to the press, researchers suggested that due to the lack of fish oil from foods, the use of supplements may be warranted—after further research confirms their findings.

My Take

Why would fish oil reduce the risk of breast cancer? Researchers suggest that it's possibly due to the anti-inflammatory nature of the omega-3s. I agree, but I think there's more to it. Increasing fish-oil intake changes the ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids in the diet. Because most omega-6s are pro-inflammatory and omega-3s are anti-inflammatory, reducing the ratio from the typical 20:1 to anything lower has got to help. Whatever the reason, if you don't eat fish, it's important to take fish oil every day.

There was one more part to this study that didn't receive as much press, and I wish it had. Researchers also found out what was *not* associated with an increased risk of breast cancer: soy and black cohosh. Women ask me about those two nutrients all the time. This is yet another study that demonstrates that the isoflavones in soy that are weak estrogen binders don't increase a woman's risk of breast cancer. Simply put, you don't have to fear soy, so ignore all the misinformation found all over the Internet.

The Bottom Line

Fish fat is beneficial for a variety of reasons. It would seem apparent that if you want to reduce your risk of several degenerative diseases such as hypertension, coronary heart disease, and now cancer, you'd make the regular use of fish oil a part of your healthy lifestyle. I do, and so does the rest of my family.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev; 19(7); 1696–708.
2. Cancer Causes Control. 2010 Mar;21(3):357-71.

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