

Fact Sheet



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The Healing Power of Your Fork: A Brain Tumor Survivor's Eating Plan

BY JEANNE M. WALLACE, PH.D., C.N.C.

Adopting a healthy diet—in addition to healing other aspects of your life (spiritual, emotional, and social)—offers a way for you to be directly involved in your care. It is important for patients to become actively involved partners in their healing. In this article I would like to share some simple dietary strategies you can use to complement your treatments and assist in your healing process.

Dietary fat: friend or foe?

Perhaps the most important detail to give attention to are the fats in your diet. Many people heed warnings to avoid a high-fat diet. However, if you adopt a diet too low in fat, you can deprive yourself of essential fats that could help you fight your tumor! While most nutrition authorities advocate a low-fat diet, brain tumor patients may benefit from higher fat intakes. A study in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* (April 1995) reported decreased tumor glucose uptake and clinical improvement among brain tumor patients on a high fat diet. Seizure control may also improve on a higher fat intake. Hold it! Before you grab those French fries or dig your spoon into that ice cream, read on. The quality of the fats in the diet are of great importance and can make the difference between healthful and hazardous!

Here's the scoop. The fats we eat can be made into chemical messengers called prostaglandins. Some prostaglandins are "bad": they can trigger inflammation, suppress the immune system, and feed tumor growth. These prostaglandins come from saturated fats (in meat and dairy), hydrogenated oils (margarine and shortening), and trans fatty acids (oils heated to high temperatures). You'll want to eat these foods sparingly. Banish margarine! Choose baked and steamed foods over fried ones. Pick low-fat dairy, skinless poultry, and lean meats. Read labels so you can steer clear of partially hydrogenated oils.

Other prostaglandins, however, are "good." They can boost immune function, reduce swelling and inflammation, and possibly help to suppress tumor growth. As an added benefit, these fats can improve the efficacy of chemotherapy by making tumor cell membranes more permeable to the drugs and reducing tumor resistance to chemotherapy. These beneficial prostaglandins derive from the omega-3 fats found in fish and flax. A brilliant German researcher, Dr. Johanna Budwig, won international recognition for her successful work with cancer patients by emphasizing a high intake of flaxseed oil. Flax oil must be kept refrigerated and cannot be cooked. One to three tablespoons of flax oil daily can be added to smoothies,

made into salad dressing or mixed with a small amount of butter, to make a "better butter." Eating cold-water fish (e.g., tuna, salmon, cod, mackerel, herring, sardines) 3–4 times a week may also help.

Another class of fats, the omega-6 oils—including vegetable oils, nuts and seeds—are tricky. They can be transformed into either good or bad prostaglandins, depending on certain metabolic factors. Rather than take chances, you should limit your intake of the omega-6 fats. Focus on the omega-3 fats and olive oil, an omega-9 which is neutral and healthful to use in moderation.

Just a spoonful o' sugar

There is a relationship between sugar and cancer cells. In fact, cancer cells can gobble 10–15 times more sugar than normal brain cells.

Additionally, a high sugar intake may increase inflammation and suppress immune function. If you're like most Americans, your diet contains nearly 150 pounds of sugar per year! One very important thing you can do is to try to reduce the amount of refined sugar and carbohydrates in your diet.

Choose whole grain products. Explore the wide variety of whole grains available: quinoa, amaranth, buckwheat, millet, kamut, and spelt. When you crave something sweet, lean towards naturally sweet vegetables (like beets, sweet potatoes, and carrots) and fresh fruits. Try the herb stevia, which can give foods a sweet taste without feeding sugar to cancer cells. While the jury is still out on whether artificial sweeteners contribute to brain tumors, I recommend avoiding them!



Super Foods

Brassica family vegetables

broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, broccoli sprouts

Bioflavonoid-rich fruits

raspberries, blueberries, cherries

Onions and garlic

Green foods

chlorella, barley greens, spirulina, wheat grass and others

Sea vegetables

nori, dulse, wakame, hijiki

Green tea

Soy products

tempeh, miso, tofu, soymilk, soy nut butter

Eat your Super Foods

You can super-charge the healing power of your diet by including Super Foods. These foods contain special constituents called phytonutrients. Several phytonutrients have made headlines as recent research demonstrates their significant tumor fighting and immune boosting properties—soy's genistein, green tea catechins, and broccoli's sulforaphane to name just a few. To date, more than 2,000 phytonutrients have been discovered. Super Foods include the following: brassica family vegetables (broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, broccoli sprouts); bioflavonoid-rich fruits (raspberries, blueberries, cherries); onions and garlic; green foods (chlorella, barley greens, spirulina, wheat grass and others); sea vegetables (nori, dulse, wakame, hijiki); green tea; and soy products (tempeh, miso, tofu, soymilk, soy nut butter). Try to include one or more of these foods with every meal.

An excellent cookbook for phytonutrient-packed recipes is Lisa Turner's *Meals that Heal* (1996). These recipes are inviting, easy to prepare, and best of all, the meals taste wonderful!

Fabulous fiber

Fiber is a great friend to the brain tumor survivor! Adequate fiber intake may help protect against both diarrhea and constipation, lowers elevated cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and assists in regulating blood sugar levels (a particularly helpful benefit if you are taking decadron, which can elevate blood sugar levels). By providing a sensation of fullness, fiber may help you lose extra weight gained while taking decadron.

Most breads, cereals and pastas are not good sources of fiber because the outer layer of bran is removed during processing. Selecting whole grain products is a start—indeed, oat bran is a nice source of fiber—but fiber goes way beyond bran! Your best sources of fiber are fresh vegetables, fruits, and legumes (lentils, peas and beans). Try to eat 4–5 servings of vegetables per day, and 1–2 servings of fruits. If you need a fiber supplement, purchase whole flax seeds, grind 1–2 Tbsp. daily as needed, and mix the flaxmeal into smoothies, low-fat yogurt, applesauce, or oatmeal. Because fiber supplements can inhibit the absorption of certain drugs, check with your doctor or nurse if you are taking these. Make sure to drink ample water!

Beyond good intentions

The side effects of brain tumor treatments—fatigue, weakness, nausea, reduced appetite—can sometimes hinder your good intentions to eat well. Digestive bitters, a brew of bitter-tasting herbs, can be used to enhance digestion. Take 30–40 drops in a small glass of water, 20 minutes before a meal. Try eating smaller, more frequent meals. Chew thoroughly to maximize your digestion. Eat in a quiet, pleasant atmosphere to reduce stress.

Make the most of your time and energy. When you cook, make plenty for leftovers. Set aside one afternoon to wash and chop vegetables for the week, fix a soup or stew, assemble a dish you can heat up later for quick meals. Too stressed to cook healthfully? Reach out to friends and family. They'll be grateful for the chance to offer their support. This article can give them some direction in preparing healthy meals for you.

In closing, may you take joy in eating well. Eat in community, sharing with friends and family. Eat to celebrate life, nourish your soul, and feed hope ... And may this journey bring you healing and wholeness. ■

Jeanne M. Wallace, Ph.D., C.N.C., is a clinical nutrition consultant specializing in integrative nutrition and herbal support for people with brain tumors. She gives thanks to the many inspiring individuals and families who, facing the challenge that a brain tumor brings, have taught her so much about the preciousness of everyday life and our relationships to each other.

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The National Brain Tumor Foundation (NBTF) was founded in 1981 as a non-profit organization by people whose lives were affected by brain tumor disease. NBTF provides support services for patients and their families and raises funds for research to treat and cure brain tumors. For more information call 800.934.CURE.

NATIONAL BRAIN TUMOR FOUNDATION
414 Thirteenth Street, Suite 700, Oakland, CA 94612-2603
Tel: 510.839.9777 Fax: 510.839.9779
Web Site: www.braintumor.org
E-mail: nbtf@braintumor.org
800.934.CURE

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