

Cutting Cancer Risk with Heart Health

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The research showing that the lifestyle for cancer prevention aligns with overall good health was strengthened this week with a study showing how following steps to reduce risk for heart disease can cut risk of cancer in half.

The study was published this week in the journal *Circulation*. It used the American Heart Association's (AHA) seven metrics for ideal cardiovascular health, many similar to AICR's evidence-based recommendations for cancer prevention.

"This study adds to the growing body of evidence showing that cancer, heart disease and other diseases don't occur in a vacuum – a healthy lifestyle matters," said AICR Nutrition Manager Alice Bender, MS, RD.

"Our recommendations were designed to address a number of chronic diseases... this emphasizes that you don't have to follow one strategy for heart disease and another for cancer; if you follow our recommendations you are lowering your risk for many diseases."

For the study, researchers first determined whether approximately 13,000 men and women followed the AHA's steps for heart health. Participants were interviewed and examined at the start of the study to determine which health factors they met or followed. About 20 years later, the researchers reviewed cancer registries and hospital records and determined that 2,880 of the participants ended up with cancer, primarily of the lung, colon or rectum, prostate and breast.

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- Being physically active
- Keeping a healthy weight
- Eating a healthy diet
- Maintaining healthy cholesterol levels
- Keeping blood pressure down
- Regulating blood sugar levels
- Not smoking

Participants were part of the Atherosclerosis Risk In Communities (ARIC), a study launched in 1987 to investigate heart health. Participants were interviewed and examined at the start of the study to determine which health factors they met or followed. When the participants entered the study they were 45 to 64 years old and cancer free.

After 17 to 19 years of follow-up, the researchers found that 2,880 of the men and women had been diagnosed with cancer, primarily cancers of the breast, colon, prostate and lung.

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Overall, the more factors people met or followed, the lower their risk of cancer. Compared to those who met or followed none, participants who met at least six of the factors had a 51 percent reduced risk of cancer. Those who met four factors linked to a 33 percent reduced risk, and meeting one or two linked with a 21 percent lower risk.

Because smoking is so strongly linked to increased cancer risk, the researchers then conducted an analysis without considering smoking. Participants who met five or six of the remaining six factors had a 25 percent lower cancer risk than those who met none.

Most of these steps will lead towards a healthy weight, says Bender, and excess body fat links to increased risk of seven cancers, including post-menopausal breast and colorectal. “And we know that having a healthy weight, a healthy diet, and activity, these things create a healthy body environment where diabetes, cancer and heart disease are less likely to thrive.”

For more on the specific dietary recommendations for both diseases, read “[Eating to Prevent Heart Disease and Cancer](#)” in the last issue of CRU.

Source: Laura J. Rasmussen-Torvik et al. “[Ideal Cardiovascular Health is Inversely Associated with Incident Cancer: The Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities Study.](#)” *Circulation*.

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