

The Role of Nutrition in Cancer Treatment: Addressing Side Effects and Enhancing Efficacy

- Dr. Gauri Rokkam

Nutrition plays a major role in decreasing the side effects that cancer treatments create. Not only can it decrease the side effects, but it can also make the drug more effective, thus decreasing the quantum of the need for the drug. Let me just address some very major things due to the lack of time. The first thing I would say is that most people come with many gastrointestinal gut problems as the side effects of cancer therapy, like ulcers in the mouth, diarrhea, constipation, loss of smell and taste, difficulty swallowing, bloating, and many other issues.

What do we do? The food should be very simple, easily digestible, and bland. Fruits perfectly suit the bill here. Eating fruits, which are simple, easily digestible, have all the nutrients required for repair and healing. They are sweet, full of innate water, and rich in minerals. But it's important to understand that you shouldn't just eat one piece of fruit or one type of fruit and expect it to cure something. No, it has to be large amounts of fruits. The key here is colors and variety. The more colors, the more varieties, the better. Fruits have certain antioxidants and phytochemicals that can actually fight, heal, and repair. This can be done for all the symptoms I mentioned.

Another important thing that cancer drugs or treatments do is suppress the immune system. So, other than the time when you have the above-mentioned symptoms, it is very important to have a very balanced, healthy meal. What defines a healthy meal? A balanced meal should include whole grains, not refined grains. Make anything you want according to your culture, practices, and recipes, but they should be whole grains to give us carbohydrates that can provide sustained energy.

Second, include some amount of dals or grams to provide the necessary proteins. I need to stress here that people think eating more proteins will help more. No, it's the exact opposite. It is very essential to eat fewer proteins and more grains and vegetables, especially green leafy vegetables and fruits, which will give you all the vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and phytochemicals.

Regarding fats, include natural fats like coconut, copra, til, mustard, groundnuts, and seeds. Use as little refined or extracted oil as possible. If you can make your meals like this on a daily basis, then you will be able to keep your immune system charged to fight whatever infections the treatment may make you susceptible to.

Next, let's discuss bone loss induced by treatments leading to osteoporosis. To counter this, increase the intake of natural foods rich in calcium, like millets (such as ragi), beaten rice, and grams like Bengal gram dal. All grams with the skin, green leafy vegetables, and dry fruits are also rich in calcium. When I say dry fruits, don't mix them up with nuts. Dry fruits like prunes, plums, dates, and raisins are what I mean.

Eating calcium-rich foods is the first step. However, simply consuming calcium-rich foods is not enough; it has to be absorbed into the bloodstream. For that, we need vitamin D, which can be obtained from exposure to sunlight. So, daily exposure to sunlight is important. Additionally, increase the intake of vitamin C-rich foods such as lemons, citrus fruits, oranges, sweet limes, and others to ensure proper calcium absorption. But that's also not enough. Calcium has to be deposited into the bones for which we need resistance exercises. It could be as simple as walking. All these measures help keep the bones healthy and strong.

Lastly, I want to address fatigue. Most people, as soon as they feel fatigued or weak, grab a sweetened drink or something with sugar thinking it will give them immediate energy. That's exactly what caused the cancer, and going back to that is a very bad idea. The first thing you need to do is rest. What is the body asking for? Rest. If you see animals in nature or have pets at home, when they get sick, the first thing they do is just lie down and sleep and sleep. They rest until they recover. When they wake up or feel a bit of chill, they slowly walk towards the sunlight, lie down there, and rest again. They rest between the shade and the sunlight and sip water along the way.

That's exactly what we need to do to heal ourselves. When you are fatigued or feeling weak and tired, all you need to do is rest, rest, and rest, and sip on water or fresh fruit juices without added sugar, or tender coconut water. Another important thing to observe is that they stop eating. I know oncologists here may not agree with me, but yes, stopping eating triggers something called autophagy, which has been researched and proven. Dr. Yoshinori Ohsumi proved in 2016, winning a Nobel Prize, that autophagy is triggered by fasting. What is autophagy? All these rogue cells, where DNA damage has occurred, will kill themselves when they don't get the energy. In my medical nutrition school, I was taught to increase protein and calories, but it is wisdom and common sense to think that is what is feeding cancer and tumors.

So, it is very important to practice regular fasting on a daily basis for prevention and for managing cancer. These are some of the things I think are important.

Let me share a case study which gives me confidence in what I do. I had a client who was 41 years old from Surat. She came to me in September 2022 with breast cancer that had been detected five months prior. She had undergone surgery and was in cycles of chemo and radiation. She came with all the symptoms I mentioned, including severe nausea and vomiting. I put her on a whole food plant-based diet, stopped all sugar, animal products including dairy, and deep-fried foods. I also exposed her to natural elements, the Panchabhutas. These were the three major things I did. Slowly, over five to six weeks, she reported having no symptoms except hair fall. By September 2023, almost a year later, she got all her tests done and they were all clean. This shows the power of correcting diet and living habits, as all the panelists said.

For normal individuals, Ekadashi is a great fasting practice, and our ancestors did it perfectly. If you have obesity, you can fast once a week. If you have cancer, consult a naturopath or nutritionist who believes in holistic healing. They will know what you are going through and what you are capable of taking. Initially, I put my patients on just fruits, then move them to liquids, and then to water. It has to be in stages. This is the power of working diligently and comprehensively in nutrition.

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