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Diet myths and cancer

Fasting starves tumors, foregoing sugar slows down cancer growth, alkaline foods protect from cancer: Many special diets and dietary patterns supposedly have the potential to prevent cancer or an existing disease from spreading in the body. Do these theories withstand scientific scrutiny? An interview with Dr. Susanne Weg-Remers, head of DKFZ's Cancer Information Service (KID), on World Food Day on October 16.

Dr. Weg-Remers, many people who have been diagnosed with cancer are concerned about their diet. In most cases, this is because they hope that certain foods – or avoiding them – can prevent the disease from recurring or spreading. A multitude of recommendations of this kind are floating around on the Internet and many callers at the Cancer Information Service have questions about this topic.

Yes, that's right. For example, people frequently ask whether eating sugar increases tumor growth. There are in fact observations indicating that the energy metabolism of cancer cells differs from normal cells. But it has also become clear that this does not hold true for all cells, nor for all types of cancer or disease situations. Therefore, it is not necessary to completely abstain from sugar. Current dietary guidelines for cancer patients even clearly state that the health benefits of a diet that entirely foregoes sugar and possibly also other carbohydrates have not been proven to date.

Is it possible to “starve” cancer?

Foregoing carbohydrates altogether or fasting is usually not beneficial for cancer patients. Most of them cannot afford losing a lot of weight. However, cancer patients who are overweight despite their disease may consider eating a diet that is lower in carbohydrates, but they should do so only under medical guidance.

Coffee has also often been suspected to promote cancer.

Coffee appears to be better than its reputation, though. At least, no harmful effect has been proven so far. On the contrary, studies have revealed first indications of a protective effect, because coffee contains many important substances that are also found in fruit and vegetables. However, people who are being treated for cancer may be well advised to ask their doctors whether they would expect interactions between coffee and the medications there are taking.

De-acidifying with alkaline foods, detoxifying with detox smoothies, body cleansing with juices or teas – these are other key words often heard after cancer treatment.

Up until now, there is no scientific proof that cancer patients need detoxifying, de-acidifying or “removing” toxins. Even after stressful treatments such as chemotherapy, the body is able to detoxify itself without any help from outside. Most chemotherapy drugs are excreted within a few hours or days by the intestine and the kidneys. And as to “body cleansing”: Many hypotheses behind this idea are no longer tenable today. The theories, many of which are centuries old, no longer agree with what we know now about human metabolism and the course of diseases such as cancer. I am afraid many of these offers that cancer patients come across, for example, on the Internet are purely commercial.

Are there any special diets that can be recommended in good conscience for cancer patients?

There are no studies that clearly prove the effectiveness of special cancer diets. What we basically know today is that any diet that lacks in variety is rather more harmful than healthful. This also holds true for so-called superfoods; these are foods that are supposed to have a special positive effect on health – such as chia seeds, matcha tea or beets. When assessing special dietary concepts I recommend applying a differentiated perspective that neither demonizes nor idealizes. Instead of betting on a special diet or superfoods, it is more recommendable to eat a diet that is as varied and well-balanced as possible. If there is a danger of malnutrition caused by the disease, cancer patients may need a medically supervised dietary treatment.

The Cancer Information Service (KID) is available daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. at 0800 420 30 40 (toll-free within Germany).
www.krebsinformationsdienst.de

The German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ) with its more than 3,000 employees is the largest biomedical research institute in Germany. At DKFZ, more than 1,000 scientists investigate how cancer develops, identify cancer risk factors and endeavor to find new strategies to prevent people from getting cancer. They develop novel approaches to make tumor diagnosis more precise and treatment of cancer patients more successful. The staff of the Cancer Information Service (KID) offers information about the widespread disease of cancer for patients, their families, and the general public. Jointly with Heidelberg University Hospital, DKFZ has established the National Center for Tumor Diseases (NCT) Heidelberg, where promising approaches from cancer research are translated into the clinic. In the German Consortium for Translational Cancer Research (DKTK), one of six German Centers for Health Research, DKFZ maintains translational centers at seven university partnering sites. Combining excellent university hospitals with high-profile research at a Helmholtz Center is an important contribution to improving the chances of cancer patients. DKFZ is a member of the Helmholtz Association of National Research Centers, with ninety percent of its funding coming from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the remaining ten percent from the State of Baden-Württemberg.

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