Most cancer diagnoses tied to a poor diet, study finds

By Jacqueline Howard, CNN

(CNN) Your diet may have more impact on your cancer risk than you might think, a new study has found.

An estimated 80,110 new cancer cases among adults 20 and older in the United States in 2015 were attributable simply to eating a poor diet, according to the study, published in the JNCI Cancer Spectrum on Wednesday.

"This is equivalent to about 5.2% of all invasive cancer cases newly diagnosed among US adults in 2015," said Dr. Fang Fang Zhang, a nutrition and cancer epidemiologist at Tufts University in Boston, who was first author of the study.

"This proportion is comparable to the proportion of cancer burden attributable to alcohol," she said.

Eating junk food tied to higher risk of numerous cancers

The researchers evaluated seven dietary factors: a low intake of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and dairy products and a high intake of processed meats, red meats and sugary beverages, such as soda.

"Low whole-grain consumption was associated with the largest cancer burden in the US, followed by low dairy intake, high processed-meat intake, low vegetable and fruit intake, high red-meat intake and high intake of sugar-sweetened beverages," Zhang said.

The study included data on the dietary intake of adults in the United States between 2013 and 2016, which came from the National Health and Nutrition
Examination Survey, as well as data on national cancer incidence in 2015 from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Eating just one slice of bacon a day linked to higher risk of colorectal cancer, says study

The researchers used a comparative risk assessment model, which involved estimating the number of cancer cases associated with poor diet and helped evaluate how much diet may play a role in the US cancer burden. Those estimations were made using diet-cancer associations found in separate studies.

"Previous studies provide strong evidence that a high consumption of processed meat increases the risk of colorectal cancer and a low consumption of whole grains decreases the risk of colorectal cancer," Zhang said. "However, our study quantified the number and proportion of new cancer cases that are attributable to poor diet at the national level."

The researchers found that colon and rectal cancers had the highest number and proportion of diet-related cases, at 38.3%.

When the findings were looked at by diet, low consumption of whole grains and dairy products and eating a lot of processed meats contributed to the highest cancer burden.
Also, men 45 to 64 years old and ethnic minorities, including blacks and Hispanics, had the highest proportion of diet-associated cancer burden compared with other groups, the researchers found.

Ultra-processed foods linked to increased cancer risk
The study had some limitations, including that the data couldn't shed light on how the association between diet and cancer risk may change as a person ages.

Additionally, more research is needed to determine whether a similar association would emerge for other years and time periods in the United States.

All in all, "diet is among the few modifiable risk factors for cancer prevention," Zhang said. "These findings underscore the needs for reducing cancer burden and disparities in the US by improving the intake of key food groups and nutrients."

Avoid these 'ultraprocessed' foods and you might live longer
Ultraprocessed foods occupy a growing part of the world's diet. A 2016 study found that 60% of the calories in the average American diet come from this kind of food, and a 2017 study found that they make up half of the Canadian diet. They make up more than 50% of the UK diet, and more of the developing world is starting to eat this way.

Yet you may protect yourself from cancer by avoiding ultraprocessed foods and instead choosing organic foods, research has shown.

People who frequently eat organic foods lowered their overall risk of developing cancer, according to a study published last year in the medical
Specifically, those who primarily ate organic foods were more likely to ward off non-Hodgkin lymphoma and postmenopausal breast cancer than those who rarely or never ate organic foods.

Additionally, according to a study published in the same journal in February, we face a 14% higher risk of early death with each 10% increase in the amount of ultraprocessed foods we eat.

Why are people eating more of these processed foods?

"We are living in a fast world, and people are looking for convenient solutions. We are always stretched for time," Nurgul Fitzgerald, an associate professor in the Department of Nutritional Sciences at Rutgers University, said earlier this year.

"People are looking for quick solutions, a quickly made meal."

When selecting food, taste is the No. 1 factor for most consumers, she said, but price and convenience are also important, and with ultraprocessed foods, that convenience factor is "probably top of the list: grab and go, ready to eat."

7 top diet habits linked to increased rates of cancer

Melissa Breyer
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New research finds diet-related factors may account for more than 80,000 new invasive cancer cases each year; here are the main culprits.

When considering wishes for the world, finding the cure for cancer is always right up there with attaining world peace and ending global hunger. And for good reason; cancer is a monster. It is the second leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for 1 in 4 deaths. It causes pain, suffering, and grief – not to mention the more than $80 billion spent each year on cancer-related healthcare.

What’s profound about this is that exactly nobody wants cancer, but much of it is preventable. For instance, on average some 138,000 people die every year in the U.S. from lung cancer related to smoking or second-hand smoke.
Most of us now know that smoking comes with cancer risk – but how many of us understand just how much dietary habits are associated with increased risk of cancer?

Now, a new study from Tufts has crunched the numbers to find an estimated number, proportion, and type of specific cancers associated with food intake. Looking at the under or overconsumption of foods and sugar-sweetened beverages among American adults, the analysis is one of the few to focus on the modifiable risk factors for cancer connected to the food we eat or don’t eat.

The researchers estimated that diet-related factors accounted for 80,110 of the new invasive cancer cases reported in 2015.

A predominant number of cancer cases linked to a poor diet were for colorectal cancer; 52,225 cases of such for the year studied. Next was cancer of the mouth, pharynx, and larynx (14,421), uterine cancer (3,165), breast cancer (post-menopausal) (3,059), kidney cancer (2,017), stomach cancer (1,564), and liver cancer (1,000).

Here are the dietary components at play, in order:

1. Low whole grain intake

This was associated with the largest number and proportion of new cancer cases, with convincing or probable evidence of a link to colorectal cancer risk.
2. Low dairy intake
That low dairy intake was linked to convincing or probable evidence for colorectal cancer risk surprised me, but the study reveals the reason: “both dairy products and foods high in calcium decrease the risk of colorectal cancer, and dairy products are an important source of calcium.”

3. High processed meat intake
For eating a lot of high processed meat, they found convincing or probable evidence for colorectal cancer risk; high processed meat consumption was also linked to stomach cancer risk.

4 & 5. Low vegetable and fruit intake
Your mother was right. The findings revealed convincing or probable evidence for low vegetable and fruit intake connected to colorectal cancer risk, as well as the risk of cancer of the mouth, pharynx, and larynx.

6. High red meat intake
Eating a lot of red meat led to convincing or probable evidence for colorectal cancer risk.

7. High intake of sugar-sweetened beverages
The researchers also included sugar-sweetened beverages in the study due to known associations between obesity and 13 types of cancer.
The team came to these conclusions using a Comparative Risk Assessment model that incorporated nationally representative data on dietary intake, national cancer incidence, and estimated associations of diet with cancer risk from meta-analyses of prospective cohort studies.

"Our findings underscore the opportunity to reduce cancer burden and disparities in the United States by improving food intake," said lead author Fang Fang Zhang, a cancer and nutrition researcher at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts.

Through education, awareness, and holding tobacco companies accountable, the number of smokers has declined steadily over the last few decades. Can we do the same thing for improving diets? We need more education, more awareness, and more accountability from food manufacturers. Everyone wants a cure for cancer, but in the meantime, modifying one's diet could lead to a lot fewer new cases of cancer in the first place.

The study was published in JNCI Cancer Spectrum. To see more on the research and how they structured the study, click on the PDF link here.