



REPORT: Diet, nutrition, physical activity and Breast Cancer Survivors

From WCRF International's Continuous Update Project, in partnership with AICR. October 2014

Frequently Asked Questions: Breast cancer survivors want to know what they can do to make a difference in their survival and for a healthier life. Our answers to these common questions and issues can help you put the information from this new report in context for your patients and colleagues.

1. What do I tell my patients who are survivors and struggling with their weight?

The findings of this report don't change AICR Recommendations for survivors that include maintaining a healthy weight, following a plant-based diet and getting regular physical activity.

- Encourage patients who are overweight to first focus on not gaining weight during treatment.
- Work with your patients to make healthy diet changes such as replacing processed foods with added fats and sugar with lower calorie-dense foods like vegetables, fruits, whole grains and other minimally processed plant foods.
- Help your patients find ways to be physically active as they are able.

2. What outcomes did the report look at?

The studies focused on female breast cancer survivors living with a diagnosis and those who have recovered.

The outcomes studied were the link between diet, weight, physical activity and:

- breast cancer survivors dying from breast cancer
- breast cancer survivors being diagnosed with a second primary cancer
- breast cancer survivors dying from any cause

3. Why didn't the CUP report look at fatigue, pain or other quality of life issues?

The Panel focused on outcomes that were measured consistently from study to study. Although the protocol included studies that looked at quality of life outcomes, there were so many different ways studies measured and defined outcomes like pain or fatigue that they could not be compared or combined easily.

More research is needed where quality of life issues, such as fatigue and pain, are measured in comparable ways so that the body of research can be looked at as a whole.

4. I've heard soy can actually increase women's risk of breast cancer, but here the research indicates it may be helpful to survivors. How can that be?

Initial lab research did seem to indicate soy could be a problem. But human research has not shown danger, and soy may even have some positive impact. That is what this report found – an indication that eating soy foods post diagnosis may actually reduce risk of dying.

5. How do the findings of this CUP report align with other organizations' findings?

Our findings add to the global and growing body of evidence that body fatness/weight appears to link to poorer outcomes, including all-cause mortality, for breast cancer survivors. Although our report found that the research is not strong enough to make specific recommendations for breast cancer survivors, AICR's recommendations for survivors have not changed. Survivors should follow AICR's recommendations for cancer prevention, including being physically active and eating a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruits and other plant foods that support healthy weight. Other organizations promote the same message.

6. I know none of the links were strong enough to make into recommendations, but is there any reason I should be telling my patients not to follow the links?

It's true, the evidence is not strong enough to make specific recommendations for breast cancer survivors, but you can work with your patients to help them take steps for healthy lifestyle.

You and your patients are best able to determine whether focusing on lifestyle changes during treatment is appropriate. If patients in treatment are receptive, for example, you can discuss how to include some physical activity– there may be times of the day they feel more energetic and able to walk or do gentle exercises at home. Diet changes may include identifying a highly processed food like chips and pastries they could replace with health-promoting and fiber-containing foods like whole grain cereals or baked apples, depending on their needs and tolerances.

7. Exercising makes some of my patients feel better. Is it correct to say it will help my patients who are breast cancer survivors live longer if they exercise?

The evidence isn't strong enough to say that, but the research does indicate a possible link between being active and decreased risk of dying.

There are sports medicine experts, such as ACSM Certified Cancer Exercise Trainers, especially qualified to work with cancer survivors and their special needs.

8. The report talks about eating fatty foods possibly linking to poorer survival. Should I be telling my patients to avoid fat?

No. A healthful diet includes foods that contain fat, but it is important to encourage your patients to pay attention to the quality of foods, including the fat they choose. We encourage breast cancer survivors to eat small amounts of foods like nuts, seeds, avocados, healthy oils, and fish – these are all part of a healthy diet.

As for anyone, too many fried foods and other foods with added fats and too much fatty red meat can all add extra calories that do not support a healthy weight.