



## 4 Cancer Myths Busted

*EN's cancer nutrition expert Karen Collins tackles top questions on cancer and diet.*



*Avoiding gluten may not offer cancer defense.*

About a third of America's most common cancers can be prevented through healthy eating, regular physical activity, and maintaining a healthy weight, according to the American Institute for Cancer Research. But the wide range of cancer myths can make it hard to figure out what those healthy eating choices involve. *EN* addresses top cancer questions.

### 1 Does Sugar "Feed" Cancer?

All cells in our body use sugar for fuel, and many (but not all) cancer cells take up blood sugar more rapidly than healthy cells. However, avoiding sugar doesn't necessarily protect against cancer, because blood sugar comes from carbohydrate foods too. When all carbohydrate is limited, the body has mechanisms to keep blood sugar within a relatively narrow range. Chronic high blood sugar, however, may increase cancer risk by prompting higher levels of insulin and certain growth factors. Also, high sugar intake can promote weight gain and perhaps lead to changes in gut bacteria and inflammation. **Smart Move:** Keep blood sugar and insulin levels controlled with a healthy weight, regular exercise, and a healthful diet that avoids big loads of carbohydrate at once, particularly sugars and refined grains.

### 2 Does Going Gluten-Free Reduce Cancer Risk?

Gluten is a protein in wheat, rye, and barley that poses no risk to most people. For people who have celiac disease, gluten creates damage in the intestines that could increase risk of cancer, which makes following a gluten-free diet essential. Emerging research suggests that some people without celiac disease may experience digestive tract pain, headache or fatigue that improves when gluten is avoided, but this sensitivity has not been linked to cancer risk. For those without gluten-sensitive conditions, research shows no cancer protection from avoiding it. Unnecessarily avoiding gluten can result in reducing consumption of whole

grains, and their anti-inflammatory, cancer-protective fiber and phytochemicals.

**Smart Move:** If you are sensitive to gluten, choose gluten-free whole grains and other foods to make sure you get their protective nutrients. Otherwise, choose nutrient-rich whole grains in amounts that fit your calorie needs without regard to gluten.

### 3 Does It Take Massive Amounts of Produce to Reduce Cancer Risk?

Studies show the biggest drop in cancer risk comes from moving from Americans' typical low consumption of fruits and vegetables to at least five servings (about 2 ½ cups) per day. More than this likely helps further reduce cancer risk, and may help some people satisfy hunger while limiting calories for a healthy weight.

**Smart Move:** Aim for at least 2½ cups of vegetables and fruits daily. Include a variety of produce in every meal, since each contributes different cancer-protective nutrients and phytochemicals. Try swapping refined grains, meats or sweets for vegetables in meals and make fruit your first choice for dessert and snacks.

### 4 If Plant-Based Diets are Recommended, Should I Follow A Vegetarian Diet?

Diets heavy on red meat, refined grains, and sweets are linked with greater risk of cancer. However, vegetarian diets are simply one way of creating eating habits that focus on whole plant foods. Plant-rich eating that allows fish, poultry, meat, and dairy foods a smaller portion of the plate—as seen in the Mediterranean and Asian diets—is also linked with lower cancer risk.

**Smart Move:** Experiment with different ways to include a variety of nutrient-rich vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and beans in your eating habits. [EN](#)

—Karen Collins, MS, RDN, CDN, FAND

