



Question:

Do dairy products increase a woman's risk for ovarian cancer and are they safe to consume for women with a history of ovarian cancer?

Answer:

There is agreement amongst healthcare professionals that diet and cancer are closely linked. We know that eating a plant-based diet can help reduce a person's risk for cancer. The challenge lies in knowing which foods are most important in affecting or reducing a person's cancer risk. There aren't many foods that have generated as much controversy as dairy. For years the question regarding the link between dairy and ovarian cancer has been difficult to answer and the conflicting research has provided little direction on what the public should do.

Weighing the Evidence

Does dairy increase or decrease the risk? *There is no clear answer.*

Two studies conducted in 2012, have shown conflicting associations for individual dairy products (1,2). A 2002 study showed a reduced rate of ovarian cancer in women who consumed low fat milk (3). Over the years numerous studies have shown there was no association, positive or negative, with dairy intake and ovarian cancer (4, 5).

What does this mean?

The jury is still out regarding the link between dairy and ovarian cancer. All studies indicated more research is needed to be done to confirm the associations that were observed, resolve the conflicting data, and gain further understanding of the mechanisms behind the observations. Until we have a clearer picture regarding dairy and ovarian cancer, here are some practical and reasonable recommendations to consider until there is more clarity on this issue.

Dairy and Ovarian Cancer

1. If you decide to include dairy in your diet, choose low-fat or fat-free options most often.
2. Be sure to achieve an adequate amount of calcium in your diet; think about including some plant-based sources to help meet your needs. Include dark green vegetables like kale, broccoli, Swiss chard, spinach, collard greens, and mustard greens, legumes, nuts, and calcium-fortified orange juice.
3. Seek guidance from a registered dietitian if you choose to limit or avoid dairy products. It is recommended that you receive an individualized consultation from the registered dietitian (RD) in your cancer center to receive guidance on alternative ways of achieving the important nutrients and dietary components that dairy products provide such as: probiotics, calcium, vitamin D, protein, and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA).

Here is what we do know regarding ovarian cancer

Known Ovarian Cancer Risk Factors

The American Institute for Cancer Research's Continuous Update Project (CUP) report finds that being overweight or obese increases a women's risk for ovarian cancer. The report states that greater body fatness is probably a cause of ovarian cancer (9). The report also found a link between taller height and increased risk for ovarian cancer (9).

Family history of cancer: Women who have a mother, daughter, or sister with ovarian cancer have an increased risk of the disease. Also, women with a family history of cancer of the breast, uterus, colon, or rectum may also have an increased risk of ovarian cancer.

Personal history of cancer: Women who have had cancer of the breast, uterus, colon, or rectum have a higher risk of developing ovarian cancer.

Age over 55: Ovarian cancer rates increase with age. Most women are over age 55 when diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Never pregnant: Older women who have never been pregnant have an increased risk of ovarian cancer.

Menopausal Hormonal Therapy: Some studies have suggested that women who take estrogen by itself (estrogen without progesterone) for 10 or more years may have an increased risk of ovarian cancer.

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Scientists have also studied whether taking certain fertility drugs, using talcum powder, or being obese are risk factors. It is not clear whether these are risk factors, but if they are, they are not strong risk factors.

Having a risk factor does not mean that a woman will get ovarian cancer. In fact, most women who have risk factors from the list above do not develop ovarian cancer. In addition, women who do develop ovarian cancer often have no known risk factors, except that they are older than 55. Women who think they may be at risk of ovarian cancer should talk with their doctor.

References, Websites, and Resources:

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Academy of Nutrition
and Dietetics

Continuous Project Expert Report 2018. Diet, nutrition, physical activity, and ovarian cancer. Available at dietandcancerreport.org

The original question and answer were generously donated by Diana Dyer, MS, RD a cancer survivor, registered dietitian, organic garlic farmer, and the author of "A Dietitian's Cancer Story: Information & Inspiration for Recovery & Healing from a 3-time Cancer Survivor."

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