

The Breast Cancer Diet

After breast cancer struck twice, this nutritionist designed her own anticancer diet.

by Diana Grant Dyer

My life was in full swing--I had no time slots in my Franklin Planner for more cancer! But in 1995, at age 45, I received my second diagnosis of very advanced and very aggressive breast cancer, which may have been caused by the radiation treatment that I'd received for a childhood cancer.

I was shocked and really angry this time. I couldn't believe it.

I never questioned that chemotherapy and surgery would play a role in my treatment. But my risk of a recurrence was so high, I was determined to design a nutrition action plan with the best chance of tipping the scales in my favor.

In short, I wanted everything that I put in my mouth to help maximize my potential for long-term survival from cancer.

So What Should I Eat?

The daunting truth was--and is--that scientists still have lots of questions about the best anticancer diet. But I didn't have time to wait for years of research.

So I scoured libraries, reading nutrition studies in search of foods that offered tantalizing hope--as opposed to hype or potential harm. I spoke with the researchers to get their thoughts about the diet plan I was developing.

Just as important, I worked hard in my kitchen to see if this ultrahealthy diet was doable. Could this dietitian actually "walk the walk" instead of just "talking the talk?"

Five years later, I have not had a recurrence of cancer. And I have tons of energy--I never nap! I realize that there are no magic bullets, but I don't think anyone will dispute that diet plays a role. My hope is that my diet can help all women fight breast cancer.

Start by changing just one component of your diet at a time; focus first on what seems easiest to you. Maybe that will be making my Phytochemical Super Shake every day. Don't ever forget that every little change is potentially helpful, and any change is better than none!

My Diet Plan

Here's the healing plan I devised, the one I wish I'd been given by my cancer center after my last diagnosis.

3 to 6 Servings a Day of Whole Grain Foods

I threw away my white rice and now use a variety of whole grains such as brown rice, bulgur, and wheatberries. I buy only whole grain bagels, breads, cereals, crackers, tortillas, and pasta. This maximizes my intake of fiber, which may fight breast cancer by lowering levels of estrogen in the body.

1 or 2 Servings a Day of Beans

I can honestly say that my gastrointestinal tract has adapted, with a minimum of physical and social discomfort, to having beans every day! I put beans in everything from soups to salads to pizza for a huge fiber boost. I always have bean soup on hand, and I eat lots of hummus made from chickpeas. I use a lot of canned beans because they're quick and easy to keep in the pantry.

A Handful of Nuts Several Times a Week

Nuts are a great source of fiber and another likely breast cancer foe--monounsaturated fats.

9+ Servings a Day of Fruits and Vegetables

As a dietitian, I had been eating my "five-a-day" consistently. But I moved up to nine or more a day because research shows that fruits and vegetables are packed with promising cancer-fighting phytochemicals. By eating twice as much produce, I hope to create a biochemical environment in my body that maximizes my ability to resist cancer.

Getting nine servings a day doesn't happen by accident; it takes thought and planning. So I aim for three servings at each

meal plus fruit or veggie snacks each day. Once you get the hang of it, it's much easier than you think. Every single day, I try to include something from each of these groups:

- Cruciferous veggies: broccoli, broccoli sprouts, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower
- Lycopene-rich produce: tomatoes, red grapefruit, watermelon, guava
- Beta-carotene-rich produce: winter squash, carrots, sweet potatoes
- Citrus fruit: oranges, grapefruit
- Berries: strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries
- Dark green, leafy veggies: spinach, romaine, kale, collards, Swiss chard

Once a week, I eat shiitake mushrooms for their anticancer activity, and fresh or water-packed artichokes for their silymarin content. (Also found in the herb milk thistle, silymarin supports optimal liver function.)

1 or 2 Servings a Day of Low-Fat Dairy Products

I use 1 percent rather than fat-free milk because dairy fat has the highest concentration of a molecule called conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which has promising anticancer activity. I use only organic dairy products from non-BST-treated cows. (BST is a growth hormone.) Milk from non-BST cows contains lesser amounts of a compound called IGF-1. Higher blood levels of IGF-1 have been linked with several types of cancer. Much more research needs to be completed to clarify the relationship between IGF-1 and cancer, but I prefer to eliminate this possible risk factor from my diet.

1 or 2 Servings a Day of Soy Products

Soybeans contain many potentially anticarcinogenic compounds, including saponins, phytates, protease inhibitors, and isoflavones (weak estrogen compounds). So I have one or two servings a day of whole soy foods such as tofu or soy milk, which supply a total of about 25 to 50 mg of isoflavones. This amount is similar to a traditional diet in Japan, where women get far less breast cancer than do American women--though we don't have proof yet that soy is what protects them.

Fatty Fish Two or Three Times a Week

The omega-3 fats in fish such as salmon, mackerel, white tuna, sardines, and herring may help fight breast cancer. Almost all restaurants have salmon on the menu now, which is what I order when I eat out. And we eat two meals of these fish each week at home.

I've eliminated all meat and poultry from my diet to maximize my intake of plant foods. If you do eat meat, buy only very lean cuts and keep your portions small (the size of a deck of playing cards or less).

Garlic, Herbs, and Spices--Used Liberally

Every herb or spice increases your intake of phytochemicals that may fight cancer. (And they lend great flavor to my low-fat recipes!)

1 to 2 Tablespoons of Ground Flaxseed a Day

Flax is a source of lignan precursors, which are converted inside the body to a weak antiestrogen that may be useful in preventing or treating estrogen-responsive tumors. Flax also supplies a plant form of omega-3 fats. The optimal amount of flax to consume is the subject of much current research.

4 to 6 Cups a Day of Green Tea, Either Hot or Iced

I make a half-gallon pitcher of iced green tea every other day. I drink it for the promising anticancer activity of a compound it contains called epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG).

Extra Virgin Olive Oil or Canola Oil for Cooking

Both of these oils are high in monounsaturated fats, which may protect against breast cancer. I always look for processed foods with no trans fats (from partially hydrogenated oils) because these may increase cancer risk.

My goal is a low-fat diet with 20 percent of total calories from fat. Is the amount of fat you eat linked to breast cancer risk? Research is conflicting, but a low-fat diet does make it easier to stay trim, and that's another way to fight breast cancer.

In the Roughage

Before I started this diet, my fiber intake was the paltry American average of about 12 g a day. As a dietitian, that is hard to admit! Now, thanks to the vegetables, fruits, beans, whole grains, and nuts that I eat, I naturally consume a healthy 25 to 30 g of fiber a day.

I've also reduced my alcohol intake. Some studies show that even one drink a day can increase breast cancer risk. When I do have a drink, it's as a special treat. But now I choose red wine or dark beer, both of which have a higher phytochemical content than white wine or regular beer.

Moving Right Along

Regular exercise is now a must--for a healthy weight and to strengthen my immune system. When I really examined how often I exercised prior to this latest cancer, I had to admit that I did it "whenever I could." I now regularly walk 2 to 3 miles, 5 to 7 days a week. If it's icy, I have a stairclimber and exercise bike that I can use indoors.

But I try to be outside daily--sometimes it's only to fill the bird feeders--to offer my thanks for feeling the sun, wind, or rain on my face. Good research now shows the benefits to cancer patients of being in nature.

And yes, I've started supplementing my diet with modest amounts of vitamins, minerals, and herbs. (I didn't take supplements at all while I received chemotherapy.) But I still believe that the health benefits of my plant-based diet are greater than the benefits of any supplements. If I were forced to choose only one approach, I'd put my money on the diet!

Diana's Phytochemical Super Shake

This shake rocks! It equals one serving of vegetables, two servings of fruit, one serving of soy, one serving of ground flaxseed, and one serving of whole grain (wheat bran plus wheat germ)--plus one-third of your daily fiber. It's also delicious!

- 2.5 oz soft or silken tofu (about 1/3 c)
- 6 baby carrots
- 3/4 c fresh or frozen unsweetened fruit
- 1 Tbsp wheat bran
- 1 Tbsp wheat germ
- 1 Tbsp ground flaxseed
- 3/4 c calcium-fortified soy milk
- 3/4 c calcium-fortified orange juice

Put all the ingredients in a blender. Process on low speed, then increase to high for 1 to 3 minutes, or until fully blended. Makes one serving (3 cups)

Per serving: 313 cal, 18 g pro, 49 g carb, 9 g fat, 9 g fiber, 565 mg calcium, 89 mg sodium

More Information and Inspiration from Diana

After the *Detroit Free Press* printed an interview with [Diana Dyer](#) in 1997, in which she talked about diet and other therapies such as qi gong and prayer that had helped her heal, Diana was deluged with requests from cancer patients for more details. Her answer was a book, *A Dietitian's Cancer Story* (Swan Press, 1999).

Now in its fifth printing, the book is used as an educational resource at cancer centers across the US. It's available from [online bookstores](#), or the [American Institute for Cancer Research](#) (AICR) Web site. A portion of proceeds from all sales go to an endowment that Diana founded at the [AICR](#) in Washington, DC, to fund studies defining the best diet for cancer patients.

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