***Cancer prevention awareness week 20-26th March***

Can you prevent cancer? The answer is a little more complex than simply yes or no, but it is estimated that 1/3 of cancer cases in the most 12 common types of cancer could be prevented by diet, physical activity and weight control.

There are over 200 different types of cancer and statistics now showing that 1 in 2 of us will get cancer during our lives. As it is world cancer prevention week here is a look at some of the recommendations from research on cancer prevention.

It is important to remember that while there are steps that *may* reduce the risk of cancer – there is no guarantee that following all the recommendations will prevent cancer. Research has shown that the risk of cancer can be reduced, but there is always some risk present. Headlines in the media often don’t select their language carefully and will report on things ‘curing’ or ‘causing’ cancer, it is key to note that journalists are not scientists and want to write an article with a shocking or attention grabbing headline, they are not aiming for accuracy! There is no food stuff causes, prevents or cures cancer! There are also many myths and rumours that float around which are not based on any science, if you are looking for information related to cancer make sure it is from a reliable source.

There is strong evidence that weight instability increases the risk of 11 different cancers. This means being able to maintain weight and keep it stable, it does not mean a low weight or that weight loss is necessary. Studies have shown that people who have a history of ‘yo-yo’ diets are more at risk as their body weight has moved up and down a lot. Keeping weight stable can have a protective effect against cancer.

Dietary factors:

The World Cancer Research Fund has lots of information backed by science showing foods that we know affect the risk of cancer.

* Foods preserved by salt increases the risk of stomach cancer. e.g salted fish
* Processed meat like bacon increases the risk of bowel and stomach cancer
* Red meat increases the risk of bowel cancer
* There is currently strong evidence that non starchy vegetables (not potatoes) reduce the risk of mouth, pharynx and larynx cancer. In particular vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage, kale, cauliflower etc.
* Fruit decreases the risk of lung, mouth, pharynx and larynx cancer
* Dietary fibre found in fruit, vegetables, wholemeal bread, pasta, rice and cereals decreases the risk of bowel cancer
* High Glycaemic load increases the risk of womb cancer
* A diet high in calcium can decrease the risk of bowel cancer, however evidence on milk & dairy foods and cancer means an amount of calcium to consume cannot be recommended
* Garlic decreases the risk of bowel cancer

Lifestyle factors:

As well as diet there are many other lifestyle factors that can affect the risk of cancer developing.

* Alcoholic drinks increase the risk of bowel, breast, liver, mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus and stomach cancer.
* Smoking is known as the leading risk factor for lung cancer and is known as a carcinogen (a substance that can cause cancer).
* Being safe in the sun can also decrease the risk of skin cancer, sunbathing and sunbeds may be harmful.
* Physical activity decreases the risk of bowel, breast and womb. Any physical activity can have benefit, even if you have not been active before it is never too late to start! Exercise is safe before, during and after cancer, which has moved on from a more traditional ‘rest is best’ view that was taken historically for people affected by cancer.
* Choose activity that you like and can stick to whether you enjoy walking, dancing, or yoga, or sports like football or golf. Physical activity also has beneficial effects for a number of other health concerns like blood pressure and diabetes.

All of these lifestyle factors can be modified! There are many steps we can take to reduce our risk of developing cancer:

* Research shows the more fruit and vegetables we eat, the more benefit we see in terms of cancer prevention so aim to increase portions by adding extra into meals and enjoying as part of a snack.
* Limit intake of red meat to no more than 3 portions per week trying swaps like adding extra lentils or beans into meals in the place of meat. Limit processed meats like bacon and salami as they are often high in salt and fat too.
* Aim to keep weight stable and avoid fad diets or ‘yo-yo’ weight which changes a lot, avoiding large portions and keeping a regular eating pattern can help.
* Cut down alcohol consumption and follow the national guidelines for limits – no more than 14 units per week for woman and men.
* Be physically active by doing something you enjoy, start in small chunks of 10-15 minutes if you are not currently active and build the levels up. Moderate activity is still beneficial and you should feel your heart beating faster, feeling slightly out of breath but are still able to talk. This can include walking, housework like hoovering or gardening and cycling. Government recommendations are to be moderately active for 150 minutes per week.
* Be safe in the sun by always wearing sun cream, wearing a hat and sitting in the shade during the hottest part of the day. Avoiding sunbeds will also be protective.
* In addition to eating fruit, increase intake of wholemeal foods like bread and cereals and intake of beans, lentils and pulses. These are all good sources of dietary fibre which can be beneficial against bowel cancer. These foods also have a lower sugar load when eaten compared to white bread, rice and foods like biscuits or cakes. The rise in our blood sugar after eating isn't as sharp with wholemeal foods. Research has also shown the lower sugar (glycaemic) load can be protective against womb cancer.
* World Cancer Research Fund recommends following cancer prevention recommendations after cancer to prevent a cancer returning or a new cancer developing.

Useful sources:

<https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/>

<https://www.wcrf.org/>

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cancer/>

<https://www.wcrf-uk.org/uk/our-research/questions-about-cancer>