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A healthy diet for the colon

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THE colon is a crucial part of the digestive system, and many different conditions can cause it to work improperly. These conditions include inflammatory bowel diseases such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease, diverticular disease, irritable bowel syndrome and colorectal cancer. Treatment for these conditions includes diet and lifestyle modifications, medications and surgery.

According to the Malaysia National Cancer Registry Report 2012-2016, colorectal cancer is the second most common form of cancer diagnosed in both men and women in Malaysia. In most cases, it arises from small polyps that become cancerous over time. These polyps have few, if any, symptoms especially if they are less than 2cm in size. Therefore, doctors recommend screening tests to help prevent colon cancer.

Researchers overseas report that the links between diet, body weight, exercise and colorectal cancer risk are some of the strongest among the various forms of cancer. An estimated 50% to 75% of colorectal cancers cases can be prevented through lifestyle changes like healthy eating, regular physical activity and maintaining an ideal body weight, according to the Colon Cancer Foundation. Good nutrition is thus an important aspect for good colon health.

According to consultant general and colorectal surgeon Dr Mohd Zailani Mat Hassan at MSU Medical Centre, "If you care for your colon and seek ways to keep it healthy, consume colon-friendly foods that are proven to reduce the chances of diseases like diverticulosis, irritable bowel syndrome, and colon cancer."

Here is what you should eat to maintain good colon health:

1. Eat your veggies and healthy fats

There is research that correlates the Western diet to higher colon cancer rates. People who eat high-fibre diets are less likely to develop the disease. Limit the amount of meat you eat, especially processed meats.

A high-fibre diet is a daily intake of approximately 25-30g of whole, unprocessed, plantbased foods such as fruits, vegetables and grains that contain dietary fibre. High dietary fibre is good for weight loss and maintaining an ideal body weight, avoiding constipation as well as supplying prebiotics (food for good bacteria). Furthermore, dietary fibre can help slow down the absorption of sugar in the body, helping to better regulate blood sugar levels. A high-fibre diet can also help lower both 'bad' LDL and total cholesterol, reduce blood pressure and your risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

A plant-based diet means at least half of your plate should be plant-based foods, which provide many beneficial vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. It is important to eat a variety of different coloured fruits and vegetables such as raspberries, bananas, oranges, peas, cooked artichoke, broccoli, pears, apples and corn. Each plant pigment provides different nutrients or phytochemicals that offer a variety of different health benefits such as strengthened immune systems and reduced inflammation.

Consume healthy fats found in olive oil, salmon rich in omega-3, avocados and nuts. Omega-3 fats of fish alter the colon function and reduce the risk of colon cancer. Clinical studies suggest that its sufficient intake can reduce inflammation in the colon and improve gut health.

2. Limit red meat consumption

According to the American Cancer Society, the risk of colon cancer increases by 15% to 20% if you consume 100g of red meat (the equivalent of a small burger) or 50g of processed meats like sausage, bacon or hot dogs per day. Prioritise chicken, turkey and fish over beef, pork and lamb.

If you choose to eat red meat, consume no more than 350 to 500g of red meat per week. Limit cooking red meats at very high temperatures that cause charring. This causes the meat to form chemicals called heterocyclic amines and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, which are linked to an increased cancer risk.

3. Hold the sugar

Studies have found that people with ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease often have diets high in sugar and low in fibre. While sugar has not been directly associated with the progression of colon cancer, foods high in sugar are often high in calories and can lead to weight gain and obesity. Limit added sugar to less than 25g a day. Naturally occurring sugars in fruit and dairy are acceptable and can provide beneficial vitamins and minerals. Look for sugar-free alternatives like sparkling water and unsweetened teas or coffees.

4. Choose grains wisely

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend all adults eat at least half of their daily grains as whole grains, about three to five servings. Some readily available whole grains include barley, quinoa, whole wheat flour, wild and brown rice and oatmeal. These foods contain more colon-friendly vitamins, minerals, fibre, essential fatty acids, antioxidants and phytochemicals (natural compounds that have a beneficial effect on the body) than their refined grain counterparts, such as white flour and white rice. An easy way to determine if the food is a whole grain is to check the label. If the first ingredient on a grain product says "enriched," it is not a whole grain.

5. Diversify your gut microbiome

A healthy colon contains billions or even trillions of beneficial bacteria per millilitre. A diet containing a variety of nutrient-dense food types, fibre-containing foods and probiotic food sources helps to shape a colon's microbiota. A plant-based or Mediterranean-style eating pattern has been shown to diversify the gut microbiota as well as reduce the risk of developing colorectal cancer. Foods containing probiotics can also help to foster growth of the gut flora in the colon. Those looking to increase their intake of probiotics may try foods such as yoghurt, kimchi, kombucha, tempeh, kefir, miso and sauerkraut.

6. Limit alcohol and don't smoke

If you choose to drink alcohol, do so moderately. That means no more than one drink a day for women or two drinks a day for men. And if you smoke, quit. Your doctors can offer tips or refer you to a programme to help you stop.

Dr Zailani explains while eating right can help keep your colon happy, the most powerful way to prevent colon cancer is through cancer screening. Most authorities recommend undergoing cancer screening at the age of 50 years for patients of average risk. However, those in the high-risk group such as people with a family history of colon cancer, Crohn's disease or Ulcerative colitis, a colonoscopy should be done much earlier. A colonoscopy is a structural examination of the colon that allows doctors to both screen for and prevent colorectal cancer. A colonoscopy reduces the risk of developing colon cancer because precancerous polyps detected during the test can be removed.