

Physical Activity & Cancer Risk

In addition to health benefits like improved energy and weight control, researchers are learning that physical activity can also affect the risk of cancer. **There is convincing evidence that physical activity is associated with a reduced risk of cancers of the colon and breast.** Several studies also have reported **links between physical activity and a reduced risk of cancers of the lung and lining of the uterus** (endometrial cancer).

How is this possible?

Colon Cancer Risk: Individuals who are physically active can reduce their risk of developing colon cancer by 40 to 50 percent, with the greatest reduction in risk among those who are most active. Many researchers believe physical activity aids in regular bowel movements, which may decrease the time the colon is exposed to potential carcinogens. Increased physical activity also causes changes in insulin resistance, metabolism, and hormone levels, which may help prevent tumor development. Physical activity has also been found to alter a number of inflammatory and immune factors, some of which may influence colon cancer risk.

Breast Cancer Risk: Physical activity causes changes in hormone metabolism, body mass, and immune function, which may prevent tumor development. In fact, physically active women have up to a 40 percent reduced risk of developing breast cancer. Most evidence suggests that physical activity reduces breast cancer risk in both pre-menopausal and postmenopausal women.

A recent major report from the Women's Health Initiative found that among postmenopausal women, walking 30 minutes per day was associated with a 20 percent reduction in breast cancer risk. The health benefits of physical activity were greatest among women who were of normal weight; they experienced a 37 percent decrease in risk. The protective effect of physical activity was not found among overweight or obese women.

Endometrial Cancer Risk: Studies also suggest that women who are physically active have a 30 percent to 40 percent reduced risk of endometrial cancer, with the greatest reduction in risk among those who are most active. Changes in body mass and alterations in level and metabolism of sex hormones, such as estrogen, are the major biological mechanisms thought to explain the association between physical activity and endometrial cancer.

Lung Cancer Risk: It is possible that individuals who are physically active have a 30 percent to 40 percent reduced risk of developing lung cancer. Investigators hypothesize that improvements in pulmonary function and ventilation in active, compared to inactive individuals, may explain the possible association between lung cancer and reduced physical activity.

Sources:

National Cancer Institute - <http://www.cancer.gov/newscenter/benchmarks-vol4-issue1/page2>,
American Cancer Society www.cancer.org.

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