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Heart to Heart Talk

With Philip S. Chua, M.D.

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How to Prevent Cancer

What are the causes of cancer?

In our previous article column, we defined what cancer was and discussed its etiologies (causes), and other specific questions on cancer. The most striking information we revealed last week was that more than 75% (3 out of 4) of all cancers in humans were caused by only three things: diet, tobacco, and alcohol. Therefore, one does not have to be a physician, much less a rocket scientist, to know that majority of cancers are preventable, and that it is within our power to prevent this deadly malady. The genetic factor could also be positively influenced and changed by a healthy lifestyle to one's advantage.

So, what is the problem?

The problem is the lack of discipline on our part. We continue to eat red meat and a lot of high cholesterol or fatty foods knowing these are bad for our heart and also increase our chances of having cancer of the colon, breast and uterus, etc. Smokers know tobacco cause cancer of the throat, lungs, kidney, urinary bladder, pancreas, among others, and still fume away with gusto. Moderate to heavy alcohol drinkers are aware that ethanol causes not only liver cirrhosis but cancer of the digestive tract, liver and breast, and are not scared to bend their elbow and say "cheers!" unabated. It is no longer the lack of awareness or knowledge that is leading many of us to self-destruct. It is the lack of discipline. The lack of inner strength and resolve.

Is it, therefore, hopeless?

Not by any chance. Hope springs eternal. We, humans, have a mind that controls us, but at the same time, it is a mind that we can also control, either by ourselves (supratentorial control), or by friendly external support and persuasion, or even by peer pressure. We must utilize everything within our power to "reason out" with our own selves, motivate ourselves, or even scare ourselves, until we see the truth and the light. Cancer is debilitating and deadly. And the process and stages of a protracted illness, intractable pains, hopelessness, helplessness, mounting expenses, the prospect of leaving our loved ones, and dying should be convincing and motivating enough for us to be obsessed with preventing any serious health problems, especially cancer. When one loves to hold on to something very precious,

like life and happiness, one should be ready to make sacrifices. And living a healthy lifestyle is not really too much of a sacrifice to hold on to life and happiness, is it?

Do tomatoes prevent cancer?

Yes. According to a Harvard study of 47,000 men, those who had 10 or more servings of tomato-based products per week, were 45% less likely to develop prostate cancer. There are also compelling evidences, considered statistically significant, that suggest links between tomatoes and lower risks in the development of cancer of the colon, rectum, esophagus, pancreas, mouth, breast and cervix, besides prostate. The amazing antioxidant in tomatoes is called lycopene, which is more abundant in cooked or processed tomatoes (like ketchup) than in raw tomatoes. A cup of tomato juice provides 25mg of lycopene, the recommended daily “dose.” Ten tablespoons of ketchup give 27 mg, and one cup of tomato soup, 9.7 mg, and one medium size raw tomato, 1 to 4 mg only.

What are the other natural foods that prevent cancer?

Fruits and vegetables in general have powerful antioxidants in them that reduce the risk of cancer. Broccoli, beans, lettuce, bokchoy, strawberry, oranges, papaya, pineapple, kiwi, watermelon, langka, and all the other leafy vegetables and fruits are anti-cancer to a great extent. But unless we eat them daily, they won't work. Looking at them or even smelling and touching them in the fruit stores won't do it. We must eat them every day. Of course, abstinence from animal fats, tobacco and alcohol are essential. And so with avoidance of chemical pollutants, radiation exposure and UV rays from sunlight.

How about fiber?

Foods high in fiber, like bran, wheat, oat meal, beans, grains (couscous, quinoa), not only lower cholesterol and good for the heart, but they also reduce the risk of cancer. Beans, rich in fiber and protein, are a good substitute for red meat. Fiber in capsules now sold in stores is not effective. Natural food fiber is the best. While vitamins and minerals are recommended, they good as supplements and not a substitute for healthy ingredients from natural foods.

Is it true that exercise reduces cancer risk?

Yes. Physical exercises does not only control body weight and lower cholesterol but also reduces the risk of cancer. One does not have to jog for half an hour a day to get the benefit. Walking 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes after dinner are vigorous enough to do the job. Brisk walking for those who can tolerate it is even better. Parking away from your destination and getting of the bus or jitney and walking the rest of the way, using stairs for a couple of floors instead of elevators, drinking a tall glass of ice cold water before each meal, and being

physically active in general, are most helpful in reducing cancer risk, besides abstinence from red meat and alcohol.

How about those anti-cancer pills and Noni Juice?

Pills and juices being marketed as anti-cancer are as effective as tap water from your faucet. The manufacturer's claims have no scientific basis whatsoever. At least drinking tap water is a hundred fold cheaper and has no potential serious complications. Besides, drinking a lot of water is good for your kidneys, unlike those pills and juices, which might cause damages to your kidneys and liver. Legitimate drugs like Tamoxifen, currently used among women who had breast cancer, is now under study for its potential "prophylactic" use to reduce breast cancer in healthy women. When the final official reports are out, we shall relay them to you in this column.

So what is a sound anti-cancer strategy?

There are several behavioral and lifestyle changes we can do to lower or prevent cancer, and many of these changes are common sense and practical measures. But, as I stated earlier, first, we must have the discipline, determination and resolve. Then, we must religiously implement our strategy.

One incentive to stay healthy and well are our loved ones. If our self-gratifying bad habits and lifestyle should kill us, it will be a tragedy for us, but it will be an even greater tragedy for our family and loved ones. The emotional, psychological, social and financial devastation that will befall our loved ones when we die is horrendous, to say the least. So, we cannot afford to be so selfish and so self-centered as to allow this to happen. Let us take good care of our body and mind. Let us grow old and happy with our loved ones.

A safe and sound cancer prevention strategy includes all of the following regimen: (1) abstinence from tobacco (2) eating fish and a high-fiber, low fat, diet (with a lot of fruits, vegetables, whole-grain, bran, etc.) instead of red meat; (3) taking multivitamins; (4) doing regular physical exercises for an hour at least four times a week; (5) avoidance of exposure to too much sunlight, polluted air, agents like asbestos, household chemicals in our home environment or workplace; and, (6) limiting alcohol ingestion to one or two drinks a day. In short, stay away from carcinogens and live a healthy life-style through self-discipline.

So, if you are serious about reducing your risk for cancer, do not look for a miracle pill or juice, lotion or potion. Starting today, make some simple changes in your lifestyle as we have suggested above. You'll be amazed how this could change your life and those of your loved ones, for the better.

Sounds simple and inexpensive? You bet. Try it. You may even live to appreciate the benefits from your sacrifices of today on your 100th birthday.

Our readers are invited to send in their medical questions for possible inclusion in future issues of this column. Mail your questions to the author at Heart to Heart Talk, c/o Cebu Cardiovascular Center, Cebu Doctors' Hospital, Osmena Boulevard, Cebu City, Philippines, or e-mail them to heart@chua.net



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