Coffee May Improve Survival After Breast Cancer

The new study adds to a growing body of research on how diet affects breast cancer survivors' health.

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New research suggests that drinking coffee after breast cancer treatment may improve survival. The study, funded by AICR, adds to a growing body of research on how diet affects breast cancer survivors' health.

The study was published in the British Journal of Cancer.

When it comes to cancer research, coffee lovers have had plenty of good news in recent years. AICR's evaluation of the global research found strong evidence that coffee protects against both liver and endometrial cancers. Other research has suggested coffee may lengthen survival.

But few studies have focused on how this popular beverage may affect breast cancer survival. These studies have been relatively small and given inconsistent findings.

Daily Coffee and Survival

The study included 8,900 women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer. The women were part of the Nurses Health Studies and they had completed questionnaires about their dietary habits — along with other lifestyle and relevant factors — every four years. Lead author and AICR grantee Maryam Farvid, PhD., and her colleagues, calculated averages of the women's coffee and tea habits at least a year after diagnosis and every four years thereafter.

After a median of almost a dozen years, 1,054 women had died from breast cancer out of 2,501 total deaths. Drinking over three cups of coffee a day was associated with a 25 percent lower risk of dying from breast cancer compared to non-coffee drinkers during the course of the study. Drinking over two cups of daily coffee linked to a similar lower risk of dying from any cause. Using the last questionnaire women completed before they were diagnosed, the study found that coffee intake pre-diagnosis was not linked with survival.

Three cups of daily tea after diagnosis was also associated with a 26 percent lower risk of dying from any cause compared with non-drinkers. These links showed after taking into account breast cancer treatment, BMI, physical activity and other factors that can affect survival.

This study shows a correlation, and that coffee and tea can contribute to a healthy diet, but it does not point to the beverage alone increasing survival. The findings add to the evidence showing the benefits of coffee while reassuring those breast cancer survivors who have a coffee-drinking habit, the paper concludes.

Coffee contains caffeine and other phytochemicals well studied in lab research for controlling cancer cell growth. Coffee's compounds may affect survival by reducing high levels of insulin and inflammation, the paper suggests.

In general, moderate amounts of coffee are considered safe for most people. (Caffeine does act as a stimulant and some people may need to avoid for various reasons.)

Lifestyle and Living After Breast Cancer

This latest study adds to previous research by Farvid suggesting that what breast cancer survivors eat and drink after a diagnosis can improve survival. AICR wrote about two of those studies here.

AICR's latest report on breast cancer survival found that evidence indicated certain healthy lifestyles improved survival, yet the evidence was limited to draw a conclusion. Cancer survivorship is a fast-growing area of research. What evidence does clearly show is that healthy eating and physical activity lowers risk of the most common cancers. That is why AICR recommends that cancer survivors follow the same recommendations to lower risk, if and when they are able.

You can read more on the research between coffee and lower cancer risk here.

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