

Keeping Summer Healthy: Easy Cancer Prevention Tips

These plant-based meals are quick, delicious and healthy any time of the year.

August 28, 2023 By American Institute for Cancer Research and Karen Collins

Key Takeaways:

- Make healthy plant-based summer meals that are quick and delicious.
- Limit red and processed meat as you follow healthy grilling guidelines.
- Choose summer drinks that are refreshing and follow cancer prevention recommendations.
- Enjoy regular physical activity for mental and physical benefits.

Your summer mindset may put reducing your risk of cancer on the backburner as you focus on fun in the sun, spontaneous get-togethers and vacation days. But with these tips for summer, you don't have to choose taking care of your health OR enjoying summer living. You can do both and have a terrific summer!

Add a Plant-Based Slant to Summer Meals

Meals that fit the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) Cancer Prevention Recommendations are built around vegetables, fruits, whole grains and pulses (like dried beans and lentils). If you were accomplishing this with hearty soups and casseroles in the winter months, you can adapt those same concepts for delicious summer meals.

Grain-based salads can be a refreshing side dish or one-dish meal with a plant-slant. You can prepare them ahead and make extra to keep in the fridge (for up to five days). What a time saver!

You can adapt the same basic recipe to make it come out differently every time.

- Use whatever vegetables and whole grains you have on hand. That's a great way to reduce food waste and save money. Pasta is a traditional favorite for these summer salads. Choose whole grain pasta for more cancer-fighting fiber and best all-around nutrition. But don't stop there! Switch things up by using other whole grains, like whole wheat couscous, brown rice, bulgur and quinoa.
- Check your proportions. If your usual grain salad is mostly grains with bits of vegetables for color, you can keep the same flavoring ingredients, but add more vegetables. This will boost vitamins and protective phytochemicals. Aim to fill about half of the whole grain salad bowl with vegetables.
- Don't stress over dressing. Use a basic dressing made with olive oil (or other heart-healthy oil) and a mild vinegar or lemon juice—try the dressing in this AICR [Mediterranean bean salad](#). Add garlic and whatever herbs or spices suit your mood.

Try this [Picnic pasta salad](#) and this [Mediterranean quinoa salad](#).

[Grilled vegetables](#) are perfect for summer meals. Serve them warm right off the grill. Or grill ahead and use them in cold salads.

- Make kabobs that are vegetables-only or include some chunks of chicken, lean meat or marinated tofu.
- Grill fruit for a surprise treat to add to salads, as a side dish or as part of mixed kabobs. You can grill fruit right on the grill, in a grill basket or on kabob skewers. Any fruit that's relatively firm is well-suited to grilling, including peaches, pineapple, bananas and figs.

Beans can amp up a healthy summer meal in lots of ways, so think beyond the traditional three-bean salad. Beans provide a boost of fiber that makes it easier to meet recommendations for cancer prevention and heart health. Plus, they are a more affordable protein option compared to

meat. Bonus: they are a classic part of many different cultural variations on the Mediterranean diet.

- Create a meatless main dish from any mixed grain and vegetable salad by adding beans or lentils. A bean-based main dish like this is perfect vegetarian picnic food, providing a choice that works for a group of people with a variety of dietary preferences.
- Count on beans for an excellent source of plant protein that helps you meet protein needs while reducing portions of other sources of protein, whether poultry, meat, fish or cheese.
- Beat the clock when you're short on time by opening a can of chickpeas or other pulses. If the can doesn't say "No salt added," simply drain in a sieve or colander and rinse to reduce the sodium content.

Healthy Grilling—Limit Red and Processed Meat

Healthy grilling depends on what you choose to make and how you prepare it. Processed meat (like hot dogs and sausage) and red meat (like beef and pork in excess amounts) are strongly linked with an increased risk of colorectal cancer. That's among our most common cancers, and it's a cancer on the rise now in young adults. So, limiting red and processed meats is part of healthy grilling.

- Keep meals plant-based. Experiment with grilling vegetables, as noted above. Choose poultry and seafood to grill more often than red and processed meat. If you enjoy red meat, keep within the recommended limit of no more than 12 to 18 ounces per week by cooking lean meat chunks on veggie-loaded kabobs.
- Follow smart grilling practices like using a marinade, keeping the cooking temperature a bit lower and avoiding charring. These healthy grilling steps reduce your exposure to cancer-causing compounds called HCAs and PAHs that form when meat and poultry are cooked over intense heat or smoke. Read more about healthy grilling [here](#).

- Keep your eye on proportion. Think about the proportions on the [New American Plate](#). Shift the focus of the meal away from meat. Have a small amount of meat and add more vegetables, beans and whole grains as the star on your plate. Let summer fruits—grilled or raw, as a simple side dish or mixed with vegetables or other foods—add color and flavor to your plate.

Healthy Summer Drinks

Cancer prevention recommendations include both limiting sugar-sweetened drinks and limiting alcoholic beverages. There are still many refreshing and tasty options to enjoy more often.

Sugar-sweetened drinks are the top source of [added sugars](#) in the American diet. Sugar-sweetened drinks make it easy to consume more calories than we need.

Alcoholic drinks are also high in calories. Limiting consumption has extra importance for cancer prevention because of alcohol's direct influence on cancer risk. As alcohol is broken down in the body, it forms a compound that's been established as a carcinogen. Alcohol consumption tends to raise estrogen levels in the body, a concern for estrogen-sensitive cancers.

- Think beyond cola and other soft drinks. They aren't the only cold drinks that are loaded with sugar. Each tall 16-ounce sugar-sweetened glass of iced tea or lemonade gives you as much sugar as 10 or 12 large marshmallows.
- Jazz up your water. Try new ways to give plain water a little extra flavor and keep a pitcher in your fridge. Explore the range of unsweetened sparkling water subtly flavored with fruit or ginger essence.
- Choose a non-alcoholic drink, not a different alcoholic drink. Cancer risk is consistent, whether you choose beer, wine or distilled spirits.

Enjoy Active Play Time

Physical activity and healthy eating work hand-in-hand to reduce cancer risk. Keeping physically active makes it easier to avoid weight gain (or re-gain). But physical activity gives you lots of benefits that aren't reflected on the scales. Exercise helps reduce loss of muscle as we age.

Physical activity also reduces cancer risk through its effects on hormones and immune function. Combine all that with its role in emotional health and stress reduction, and you see that finding a way to keep active all year round is important.

- Walk in the morning or at night for cooler temperatures. Make a pleasant after-dinner walk your new habit before you settle down with a book or show. It can be a social time with family, neighbors or friends. Or use a walk for personal time to focus intentions on the day ahead and find highlights of the day that's ending you can savor or learn from.
- Think like a kid and make time for play time. Relaxing doesn't need to mean sitting or lounging. Enjoy old favorite games and have fun with new ones. Even if they don't get your heart rate and breathing up as much as a brisk walk, any movement is better than extended sitting. Enjoy croquet, bocce, lawn bowling and other outdoor games. Play childhood favorites like frozen tag or hide-and-seek and feel like a kid again!
- Grab small blocks of time. Weekends and vacations provide opportunities for sports and hiking. But a day or two with a few hours being active doesn't make up for a week of sitting. Don't wait for "when you have time." Take advantage of even 10- or 15-minute blocks to walk once around the block. Or stay indoors where it's cool—turn on some music to dance to your favorite tunes or follow along with an online yoga class or strength-training session. You'll be amazed at how mentally and physically refreshed you feel.

Summer is a special time of year for many reasons. It's also a great time to establish new lifestyle habits that can reduce your risk of cancer. Use these tips for summer to re-energize and refresh your habits to enjoy the season and take good care of yourself.

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