

Largest Ever Study of Vegetarian Diets and Cancer Shows Lower Risk of Five Cancer Types

A new study found that vegetarians had lower risks of multiple myeloma, pancreatic, breast, prostate and kidney cancer.

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Key Takeaways

- A study funded by World Cancer Research Fund found that vegetarians had lower risks of five types of cancer compared with meat eaters. These include pancreatic, breast, prostate and kidney cancer and multiple myeloma.
- Not all cancers showed reduced risk. There were no significant differences for several major cancers including colorectal and ovarian cancer.
- The findings reinforce recommendations to eat more whole grains, beans, fruits and vegetables, while limiting red meat and avoiding processed meats to help lower overall cancer risk.

A major new study funded by World Cancer Research Fund (AICR's partner organization) has revealed that vegetarian diets may help reduce the risk of specific cancer types. This could help many people stay healthy, as there are 8–10 million vegetarians in the United States and interest in plant-based eating is growing globally.

This new study was led by scientists at Oxford Population Health's Cancer Epidemiology Unit. They pooled data from more than 1.8 million people across three continents through the Cancer Risk in Vegetarians Consortium, which is the largest ever study of non-meat diets and cancer risk.

They compared the risk of 17 different cancers across five diet groups: meat eaters, poultry eaters (who do not eat red or processed meat), pescatarians (who eat fish), vegetarians (who eat dairy and/or eggs) and vegans (who eat no animal products).

- Compared with meat eaters, vegetarians had:
- 21 percent lower risk of [pancreatic cancer](#)
- 9 percent lower risk of [breast cancer](#)
- 12 percent lower risk of [prostate cancer](#)
- 28 percent lower risk of [kidney cancer](#)
- 31 percent lower risk of multiple myeloma

Dr. Helen Croker, Assistant Director of Research and Policy at World Cancer Research Fund, says “the results suggest non-meat diets are linked to lower risks for some cancers, though not all. This highlights important differences between cancer types, and the role of different dietary patterns. To increase your overall protection from cancer, our advice is to build meals around whole grains, beans, fruits and vegetables, while limiting red meat and avoiding processed meat.”

AICR says that eating more than [18 ounces of red meat](#) weekly can increase your cancer risk. If you eat red meat, limit your consumption to no more than 3 portions a week or about 12–18 ounces (cooked).

[Processed meats](#) have been smoked, cured, salted, fermented or had preservatives added to them. AICR recommends eating little, if any, processed meats such as hot dogs, bacon, sausage and deli meats. Choose fresh roasted chicken or turkey, mashed tuna or salmon, nut butters, hummus and other bean spreads for sandwiches instead of processed meats.

Other Study Results

The full findings of this study were published on February 27, 2026, in the British Journal of Cancer. Here are some other interesting results.

- There were no statistically significant differences in risk for twelve other cancers—including colorectal, stomach, liver, lung (in never smokers), endometrial, ovarian, mouth, pharynx or bladder cancers, or non-Hodgkin lymphoma, leukemia and esophageal adenocarcinoma—in vegetarians.
- Fish eaters had lower risks of breast and kidney cancers, as well as a lower risk of bowel cancer.
- Poultry eaters were found to have a lower risk of prostate cancer.

Interestingly, people following a vegan diet had a statistically significant higher risk of colorectal

cancer when compared with meat eaters. And vegetarians had nearly double the risk of squamous cell carcinoma of the esophagus.

Aurora Perez Cornago, principal investigator of the study and former Associate Professor at Oxford Population Health, explains: “The higher risk of esophageal squamous cell carcinoma in vegetarians and bowel cancer in vegans may relate to lower intake of certain nutrients more abundant in animal foods. Additional research is needed to understand what is driving the differences in cancer risk found in our study.”

The American Institute for Cancer Research helps the public understand the relationship between lifestyle, nutrition and cancer risk. We work to prevent cancer through innovative research, community programs and impactful public health initiatives.

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