



Survivorship

Healthy Eating for a Breast Cancer Diagnosis

Hosted by: Anees Chagpar, MD

Guest: Maura Harrigan, MS, RDN, CSO, Registered Dietitian/Nutritionist, Survivorship Clinic at Yale Cancer Center

October 17, 2016

Welcome to a series of net casts brought to you by Yale University.

Thank you for joining us for this edition of Yale Cancer Center Answers where we provide you with up-to-date information on cancer care and research. Our host, Dr. Anees Chagpar, is Associate Professor of Surgical Oncology and Director of the Breast Center at Smilow Cancer Hospital. She interviews some of the nation's leading oncologists and cancer specialists, who are on the forefront of the battle to fight cancer. If you are interested in past editions of Yale Cancer Center Answers, all of the shows are posted on the Yale Cancer Center website at YaleCancerCenter.org. If you would like to join the conversation, you can contact the doctors directly, the address is canceranswers@yale.edu. Here is Dr. Chagpar.

Chagpar Welcome to another episode of Yale Cancer Center Answers. I am Dr. Anees Chagpar, and I am joined by my guest, Maura Harrigan. Maura is a registered dietitian and nutritionist for the Smilow Cancer Hospital Survivorship Clinic and a research associate at Yale School of Public Health. She is here with me today to talk about healthy eating for women diagnosed with breast cancer as this is breast cancer awareness month. Thank you so much for joining me.

Harrigan It is a pleasure to be here.

Chagpar Let's start talking about diet and cancer in general because it is such a common question that we get asked. Did what I eat cause my cancer? Now that I have had cancer, what I am allowed to eat or not? Is cancer fed by sugars or fats or other things? How do you deal with all of that?

Harrigan Anees, you hit right on the biggest issue in survivorship. For people who come to the survivorship clinic, their concern is about food and it almost translates into a fear of food because they are not quite sure what the relationship between what they eat and what caused their cancer, so they start second guessing everything and start seeking out information, which is a good thing; but unfortunately, there is a lot of bad information out there, so people tend to get very confused. A lot of what I do at the survivorship clinic is help them sort through that information.

Chagpar I think one of the big questions, in fact, I got asked this by a patient just last week, is does sugar cause cancer?

Harrigan That is a very common question and the short answer is no and that is usually when someone gives a big sigh of relief.

Chagpar But that does not mean you can consume all of the candy bars that you want because October is also Halloween month and everybody has leftover chocolate and candy.

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- Harrigan Sugar does not cause cancer. However, there is typically too much added sugar in the American diet, so we tend to eat too much that is just not good for our overall health. I do explain that sugar does have a healthy place in the diet and I actually frame it up for people and say if you look at food labels, the nutrition facts labels, sugar is listed there, but it is listed in grams which I always say is a code because no one understands, at least Americans, what grams are, so I say about 30 grams a day.
- Chagpar Of total sugar?
- Harrigan Of total added sugar and I try to differentiate between what is added sugar and what is naturally occurring sugar because right now the food labels do not differentiate between the two.
- Chagpar But they are going to?
- Harrigan They will, which is going to be a huge improvement. So about 30 grams of added sugar which translates to 7 teaspoons, one teaspoon is about 4 grams, so just that knowledge and when you go back home and look in your cabinets and start looking at labels, there are a lot of a ha moments when people realize well there is a lot of added sugars in certain products and those are the ones you want to weed out of your eating.
- Chagpar I started this big health kick recently, thanks to my brother, and I started drinking fruit and vegetable juices and going vegan and cashew milk, is that a good thing?
- Harrigan It is, it is an excellent thing, it does not mean it is for everybody.
- Chagpar When people say do I need to cut out red meat, do I need to go vegan, do I need to get all organic, do I need to be non-GMO in order to reduce my risk of developing cancer, what do you say?
- Harrigan I say none of that is necessary, there are a lot of very good healthy middle ground. Now a lot depends on a person's own health beliefs. If they want to go a little further or maybe a little more into vegan that is great, you have to do it wisely and make sure you are getting all your nutrients, but we would not want to use the word extreme, but for some people it is extreme. So there is a lot of healthy middle ground and I do promote what I call a predominantly plant based diet, meaning if you visualize it if you look at your plate 2/3 of your plate are filled with foods that come from plants and 1/3 comes from animals. So it is not necessarily vegetarian, but it is pretty close.
- Chagpar Here is my question going back to the sugars and the added sugars. So right now, the label just says sugar and so if you get a fruit and vegetable juice and it is all fruits and

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vegetables and it says no added sugars, but when you look at the sugar label like there can be 26 grams of sugar in there, like that is going to eat up your nearly 30 grams?

Harrigan What you just picked out was a product that you would think is pretty nutritious but in essence is a very high sugar product. When it is a liquid and it is predominantly food base that acts pretty active as sugar in the body. Now what I try to do is right above that sugar listing on the label is fiber. So you always want to look to see if there is any fiber in the product because the fiber tends to offset the sugar to a certain degree. So you want to see at least 3 grams of fiber in the product that is what is defined as a high-fibre food. So you always compare grams of sugar to grams of fiber, so if you see in that product there are 28 grams of sugar and 0 fiber, I would put that back on the shelf. I would rather you go eat a whole apple and eat some whole broccoli because then you are getting the fiber, often times in those liquid products the fiber is removed. Some of this juicing that people do sometimes that extracts the fiber which is usually taking one of the most protein products of the food out.

Chagpar What if you took fruits and vegetables and you put them in a blender, so really it is not juicing, do you still get all of the fiber or does the blending process get rid of the fiber part?

Harrigan No, the fiber stays in with blending; it is the juicing that extracts the fiber where you get the pulp that you remove, that I don't recommend.

Chagpar So we are going to eat a predominantly plant-based diet, we are going to make sure that the added sugars are less than 30 grams a day and that most of what we eat at least the stuff that has a label on it has at least 3 g of fiber. What about the stuff that does not have a label on it, like you go and you pick up a sweet potato and you think that is starch, but does not have fiber or what about an apple, does that have fiber or a piece of chicken, like how do you know how much fiber is in things that don't have a label?

Harrigan That is a great question. Fiber only occurs in plant foods. We will get it that way. So that sweet potato you picked up, beautiful, chock full of fiber, chock full of beta carotene, virtually fat free, it is one of mother nature's gifts to us. So any plant food has the fiber, the animal products do not.

Chagpar So getting back to sweet potato, does it matter how you eat it? I mean sweet potatoes are great, but some of us like sweet potato fries, so if we cut up a sweet potato and you cook it in a particular way, are certain cooking ways better or worse, particularly for cancer patients? For example, if you deep fry your sweet potato fries, presumably that is a little bit worse than if you baked it. Is that right?

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Harrigan That is correct. So there are 2 different issues there in terms of cooking techniques for a cancer patient. One is when you are frying something, you are adding fat, and the type of oil or the type of fat that you use matters. Again, you want to go towards a heart healthy fat, olive oil, canola oil, and stay away from saturated fats, so the type of fat matters and the amount of fat matters and that is really all about supporting heart health and also a healthy body weight, because adding fat is adding a very concentrated source of calories. Now the other issue of cooking that matters to cancer patients, really has to do with cooking at high temperatures, particularly meats. So if you are barbecuing and you char the meat, some people love that part of it, that is the part we discourage people to eat because that has actually carcinogens in it, in the charred pieces of the meat.

Chagpar So avoid barbecue season or keep to the salad part instead of the charred chicken?

Harrigan Exactly.

Chagpar What about fats, now that we are talking about fat, how important is fat for a cancer patient? I mean on the one hand people say well you need to get fats, there are these essential fatty acids and everybody needs fats and avocados are really good for you and hummus is really good for you, but then on the other hand you hear, well you don't really want fats because it is a concentrated way of getting calories and the other thing that the cancer patients often face is gaining weight a good thing or a bad thing after you have had the cancer diagnosis because maybe fats are good because then you can gain weight or is that not what we are supposed to do?

Harrigan There are about 10 questions in that question.

Chagpar I know, I'm sorry, I got so enthusiastic.

Harrigan Let me see if I could sort through that. We do need fat in our diet. As you said essential nutrients are only in fat sources and also key omega-3 fatty acids which is showing a lot of promise in terms of helping with cancer prevention. So we do need fat in the diet, but you are right, it is a very concentrated source of calories, so any foods that are predominantly fat need to be used in very small amounts, very judiciously, so for example 1g of fat gives you 9 calories, but a gram of carbohydrate gives you 4. So in terms of weight management, yes it matters how much fat you are adding to your foods because it is a very concentrated source, so it has a place but in small amounts.

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- Chagpar So how much fat should we be eating and how do we know whether that fat is “good fat” with all of these essential fatty acids in omega-3s in all of that or not so good that, like you know the labels has saturated fats and trans fats and then there is unsaturated fats and then there is mono unsaturated, how do we figure that out?
- Harrigan You really almost need a chemistry course to understand the food labels but let us go back to that original model of looking at your plate as mostly plant foods 2/3 of your plant foods, 1/3 animal products and if you put your food in that proportion, your fat distribution falls into just the right pattern. So the fats that come from plant foods are the fats we want to promote, the monounsaturated fats, the polyunsaturated fats. It is the animal products that contains saturated fats. So if you put your food in the right proportion of plants versus animals, you will get the right fat distribution.
- Chagpar So where does the occasional chocolate, the potato chips or you know the things that aren’t plants and aren’t animals, the things that are in the middle of the grocery store that all of the dietitians tells us not to go near come in?
- Harrigan That brings me what I call my 80:20 rule.
- Chagpar Okay.
- Harrigan 80% of the time, you want to be on your A game, eating this predominantly plant based diet, using meat as a condiment, keeping your foods whole and close to the ground, colorful, high in fiber and then that other 20%, your discretionary calories and that is what applies to all those foods and that is something different for everybody, so there is a place for those foods, but the majority of your time, and I say about 80% you are on you’re a game and it allows you that 20% of discretionary calories which helps you kind of stay with the 80%.
- Chagpar Got it. So really in terms of the fats, you are going to go with this distribution of 2/3 plants based fats and 1/3 coming from animals and I get the whole idea of plate, it does not matter how big the plate is?
- Harrigan Yes, it does matter, that is a good question. Portion sizes matter and in a typical American diet, our portion sizes are way out of whack, so reigning them in, again looking at labels when they are there and seeing what a portion size is and honoring that is often a big a ha moment for people. Those are really meant to be followed. Oftentimes people come to the survivorship clinic and they will be eating fairly well and

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exercising and say, I am really not losing weight and I need to lose a little more weight and our strategy is just cut your portion sizes across the board, by a quarter and then that is just what they need to enable the weight loss.

Chagpar So this brings me to this whole other can of worms that we started to open, which was weight. We know that there is a thing called an ideal body weight and some of us have an idea where we should be or at least what we feel comfortable being and there are all kinds of calculators that can tell us what an ideal body weight is. First question, how good are those calculators that give us an idea of what an ideal body weight is, like this whole BMI, does that what should we aim for somewhere in that normal BMI category or is that not really right because some people say that BMI does not really matter that can people have a huge BMI and still be really healthy?

Harrigan Yes, I would agree with that. BMI is very difficult to use on an individual basis, it has its role in, lets say research looking at populations and trends, but when it comes down to an individual it is not a tool that I use because BMI technically just measures, is a frame of reference of someone's weight in relation to their height, but it does not account for their frame or their distribution of muscle, so you could have a very muscular athlete who has a very BMI but is very fit and healthy, so the BMI does not always apply.

Chagpar So how do people and cancer survivors figure out what their right weight should be, because I will tell you, my mum was just diagnosed with cancer last year and she said, I have a reason to be overweight. I don't know if that is right, is that right?

Harrigan No, I kind of think it is an excuse.

Chagpar Maybe I am too hard on my mom. I am much nicer to my patients.

Harrigan You are very nice to your patients Anees. Sometimes people after s cancer diagnosis will kind of say, well what is the point, why should I even eat well, why should I bother to exercise, I already got cancer, so why bother, and we encounter this a lot in the survivorship clinic and my response to that is eating well and exercising and being at a healthy weight always serves you well in terms of heart health and just in terms of overall being and strength and emotional health, so it is important to take care of yourself and eating well helps you feel better.

Chagpar Right and the thing is that these days with breast cancer being so well treated people are living long and healthy lives and so it is really important right that they stay at whatever an ideal body weight is, but that brings us to the question of how does an individual figure out, what that is for them without coming to you and having some fancy tests done?

Harrigan It is difficult to just say you should weigh this much, because you really have to look at it in the context of the person and I like to look at their weight history, so if we are applying to let's say, cancer patients, one thing you always want to know is during treatment what happened to their weight, what was their weight when they started, what was their weight at the end of the treatment, what was the weight change, so some people lose weight, sometimes it can be a lot of weight and then that needs to be replenished once the treatment is done. If we are talking specifically about breast cancer patients, they tend to gain weight during treatment.

Chagpar Which is something that a lot of people do not realize?

Harrigan Right and you are very surprised by it, dismayed by it greatly, but also frustrated when they realize that it increases their risk for recurrence, so our goal in survivorship and also in the research studies that we do at the School of Public Health is to try to get nutrition and exercise and healthy lifestyles started right at diagnosis so that we can prevent this weight gain that occurs with breast cancers in women.

Chagpar So that brings us to a really good point to which is no matter where you start, right, you may start as being overweight, you may start as being at your ideal weight, but really trying to watch what you eat and exercise during that treatment trajectory, particularly for breast cancer will be at more risk of gaining weight is really important, so what do you suggest for patients? Let's say they start overweight and I am giving you that example because that happens to be the American norm, certainly was the case for my mom, what should you be doing if you were to advise her and say, you started off overweight, you want to make sure that you don't gain too much more weight, you want to get if you can down to even lower than you started, how do you do that, it is incredibly frustrating for people and especially for cancer survivors who have just gone through radiation and now they are tired.

Harrigan Yes, it is overwhelming and frustrating but there are a couple of issues there. When eating is also about being nourished and giving your body the nutrients that it needs and that is the focus particularly during treatment that you get as many nutrients in as you can so that you feel nourished and you are giving your body the tools it needs to get through treatment and minimize side effects, so you want to nourish the body first and foremost. Getting to weight management, this is the tricky part of it because women start at different weights at diagnosis, some women are obese, some women are overweight, some women are at a healthy weight. They all can be at risk for gaining weight during treatment. So one way to manage, you want to manage that weight gain and minimize it while you are nourishing the body and, the way to do that

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really is through walking, so you have to add that piece to it. So nourishing your body through choosing nutrient dense foods, walking, that is like a double barrel effect, really bolstering your immune system during treatment and minimizing side effects. Once you get through treatment and let's say there is weight loss to be had, here is where that it gets a little tough, your body does not like to lose weight.

Chagpar Yeah, I know, I have been talking to my body about that.

Harrigan It is very reluctant to lose weight, but here is the good news, it does not take much weight loss to reap the medical benefits of the weight loss. So no matter, you really have to just start from where you are at and say okay from here, a weight loss of even 2% or 5% reaps the medical benefits in terms of heart health, your body is not going to give up any more than 10%, so let's say for a 200-pound women, that is 20 pounds and she does that through healthy eating, increased walking, loses the 10%, gets to a 180 and feels fabulous, and just say okay this is where my body is at and so she has reaped the benefits of the weight loss, she is nourished, she is toned and feels great.

Chagpar And part of that I think is setting realistic expectations.

Harrigan Absolutely and that is always job one for me in terms of talking with women about managing the weight. Let's face where we are really up against a society of unrealistic expectations of body types for women and we look at it every day and we are like who are those women and why do not I look like that, most women don't and also there is a whole industry of dieting which has done women a great disservice, always making us feel that we should look differently and that we have to eat in a very restricted and difficult way, so trying to undue that mentality is part of my work.

Chagpar And the other thing is we are talking about weight loss and you mentioned eating nutritious, nutrient dense foods and walking. Walking was one of the power couples to this double-barreled effect that you were talking about, but a lot of people say that walking, I mean it is not really where the calorie burn comes from that 80% of weight loss is your diet and only 20% comes from exercise. So how much weight, no pun intended, do you put on the walking piece?

Harrigan They are equal to me, they are equal. Healthy eating and exercise are forever linked and that is another concept to get across to women that healthy weight management is about eating well and moving more. You cannot separate the two, they go hand in hand.

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- Chagpar You cannot just say I am going to give up the Oreos, but I am going to sit on the couch or I am going to run 5 miles but I am going to eat 10 gallons of ice cream.
- Harrigan Correct. You really have to realize that healthy eating and your activity are intertwined and you have to align you're eating with your activity and once you match that up, it has a synergistic effect and it is a joy to watch women experience that and once they get it, they say wow I look at food differently, I fill my plate with plant foods, I choose colorful plant foods, that is another aspect of getting all your phytonutrients in, so I fill my plate with colorful plant foods, I eat smaller amounts of meat, I walk more than I ever have, I feel great, oh and by the way, I lose weight.
- Chagpar Yeah and I love the fact that is an, oh by the way. Final question, and I know that you probably get this a lot too. Many cancer patients are going to ask about supplements, do I take a multivitamin, do I eat supplements, what is up with this EG, CG, green tea extract thing in terms of losing weight, is that a good thing, is that a bad thing, what about soy, am I supposed to avoid that or eat that and what if it is in a little bit of soy sauce at the Chinese restaurant, is that a big deal? How do you advise people about all of that?
- Harrigan That is a big question. First of all, again back to this plant versus animal model. If you are filling your plate predominantly plant foods and I just mentioned before the colors, I know again this sounds simplistic but the science behind it is robust, but remember food is visual, so I think colors, what makes the color are the phytonutrients in the plant foods and different groupings of these hundreds of phytonutrients. So when you eat by coloring and include these colors in your diet. you capture all of these phytonutrients and vitamins and minerals, this is mother nature at her best, you cannot replicate that in a pill because all those nutrients and phytonutrients, vitamins, minerals are in foods in concert with each other, where they support each other's absorption and you take that pill thinking you are replicating that, you are not, so mother nature does it best and the American Cancer Society, the World Cancer Research Fund, American Institute for Cancer Research all have come out with statement saying do not use supplements to prevent cancer, because you do not realize one supplements are not regulated by the FDA and two, they are not necessarily benign, they can interact with the medications that you are taking, so we discourage the use of supplements except in various selective case where it is more to replace a deficiency, that is different, correcting a deficiency is different from saying, oh more is better.

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- Chagpar For example, if your doctor tells you, you need to take calcium and vitamin D because so many women are vitamin deficient that is okay, but it is also good to get your vitamin D and calcium from milk and milk-based products.
- Harrigan Exactly and it is better absorbed from the food.
- Chagpar Excellent.
- Harrigan And you get your vitamin D while you are out walking.
- Chagpar There you go, enjoying the sunshine. Thank you for joining me on this edition of Yale Cancer Answers. This has been a wonderful discussion about healthy eating and breast cancer in honor of breast cancer awareness month. When you are left with the leftovers from Halloween, remember this podcast. This Dr. Anees Chagpar wishing everyone a healthy and happy tomorrow.

This has been another edition of Yale Cancer Answers. We hope that you have learned something new and meaningful. If you have questions, go to [YaleCancerCenter.org](https://www.yalecancercenter.org) for more information about cancer and the resources available to you. We hope that you will join us again for another discussion on the progress being made here and around the world in the fight against cancer.