

Easy Ways to Cut the Fat and Lower Your Risk of Recurrence

An expert in integrative medicine offers user-friendly tips on trimming fat from your diet.

By Keith Block, M.D.

In the past, there was some confusion over how big a role dietary fat plays in breast cancer. But a growing body of evidence has helped clear things up so that today, while we still don't know everything about the relationship between fat and cancer, we do know that fat has been linked to recurrence and shortened survival rates in cancer patients.

We also know that reducing the amount of fat you eat can have the opposite effect. In the Women's Intervention Nutrition Study, which looked at 2,437 postmenopausal breast cancer patients, when fat intake in their diets was reduced to 20 percent or less, risk of recurrence was cut by an impressive 24 percent. Fortunately, dietary fat intake is something that women can take control of.

My advice to women actively fighting breast cancer is to eat a diet composed of 15 to 18 percent fat, with a saturated fat intake no higher than 7 percent. Most Americans get 33 percent of their calories from fat, and 11 percent of that is the especially harmful saturated fat. That means if you're like most Americans, you need to cut the amount of fat you eat in half in order to lower your risk of breast cancer recurrence. It may seem like a daunting task, but there are some relatively simple food choices you can make to reach that goal.

Protein: I advise my patients to eliminate red meat from their diets entirely. I know there are a lot of people who have difficulty changing their diets and may find it easier to "transition" into making healthier dietary choices. In recognition of those who struggle with giving up red meat and have never felt the need to familiarize themselves with a legume, I suggest the three steps listed in the box to the right, with the understanding that this is a temporary concession for those who need to start out slowly when making significant dietary changes.

Fats: Choose foods high in healthy omega-3 fatty acids including cold-water fish such as salmon; walnuts and walnut oils; and omega-9 fatty acids that you can find in olives, olive oil, almonds and avocados. Though these contain healthier fats, they should all be consumed in limited quantities due to their relatively high fat content.

Oils: When you use oils, choose unsaturated ones like canola, flax, walnut and olive oils. Oils such as toasted sesame oil or chili-flavored oil can be used in small quantities for a huge flavor impact. Caution: Cooking oils at high temperatures can damage them and change them into harmful substances, some of which are carcinogenic.

Carbohydrates: Choose whole cereal grains such as brown rice, oats, barley and quinoa, with a variety of fruits and vegetables. Try to reduce—or even better, avoid—refined flours and sugars.

Baked Goods: Reduce fat/oil by half and substitute an equal amount of unsweetened applesauce or mashed banana. Or try plum concentrate; it is an excellent fat substitute.

Cooking: Use low-fat methods such as grilling, broiling, poaching, roasting, steaming, water sautéing and baking, all excellent ways to prepare food without adding unnecessary oils or fats. Reduce frying or avoid it altogether.

Flavor: Use herbs, spices, unsweetened fruit and vegetable juices, and vinegars. Onions, garlic, ginger, chili pepper and cinnamon not only enhance the flavor of a dish, but each can add important disease- and inflammation-fighting phytochemicals as well. Vegetables can be sautéed in a wine sauce or a well-seasoned stock instead of oil.

Fiber: Eat whole cereal grains—particularly those with soluble fiber such as oats and barley—beans and legumes, and fruits and vegetables. Cracked flax, in addition to adding healthy fiber, contains lignans, which have been shown to provide protection for women at risk for breast cancer. These fiber-rich foods help you feel full longer, and don't cause the sudden rise in blood sugar levels that can occasionally occur when consuming refined carbohydrates.

Menu Strategies

Restaurants can be one of the healthy diet's greatest enemies. Of course it's easier to eat right when you're the one controlling the kitchen and stocking the shelves. But there are ways to dine out that won't sabotage your diet. For example, consider eating at restaurants that serve Asian or Mediterranean cuisines, known to be among the healthiest in the world. Here are a few more tips:

Words to look for on the menu: *steamed, broiled, poached, garden fresh, organic, whole grain, roasted*. Ask your server to hold the butter, and use a small drizzle of olive oil as a substitute.

Avoid foods that are described as: fried, buttery, creamed, gravy, au gratin or breaded.

When eating in these restaurants, the following foods make healthier choices:

- **Japanese:** Among the cleanest and healthiest of cuisines. Choose fresh cooked fish, sushi or sashimi, hot or cold soba (buckwheat noodles), udon (wheat noodles), sautéed vegetables, steamed spinach, edamame (whole steamed soybeans), miso soup and yodofu (boiled tofu with vegetables).
- **Italian:** Phytochemically rich Mediterranean diet is high on my list. Good choices include minestrone soup, polenta or whole grain pasta with marinara sauce or olive oil with garlic (ask for light use of oil), broiled or baked fish, slightly sautéed or steamed greens, and a fresh salad with balsamic dressing.
- **Mexican:** This is a fun and healthy cuisine if you ask the right questions! Request that the beans not be cooked with lard. Some healthy choices include seafood or fresh fish, vegetarian tacos or burritos, black bean soup with chopped onions, and salads. Be careful to not overdo the guacamole! Though it's delicious and contains the right kind of fat, it has
 - a lot of fat. And remember to hold the cheese and creamy dressings!

Portion Your Protein

The average woman requires 40 to 45 grams of protein per day. Ideally, this is divided into six servings. The following foods are all healthful protein choices, and provide approximately seven grams of protein (or one serving) each:

- 1/2 cup cooked legumes (beans, peas, lentils, etc.)
 - 1/4 cup tofu or tempeh
 - 1 ounce seitan
- 1 ounce fish (ideally, cold-water fish)
 - 2 organic egg whites

Cut the Beef!

1. If you eat red meat on a regular basis, start by cutting down the amount and frequency. When you do eat it, choose lean cuts (e.g. tenderloin) of organic meat from grass-fed animals. Be sure to watch portion size. Limit each serving to three ounces (the size of a deck of cards).
2. Begin substituting skinless organic poultry, turkey burgers, eggs fortified with omega-3, fish and lean wild game such as venison. Ostrich and buffalo are good choices, too.
3. Finally, shift away from red meat altogether by eating cold-water fish (salmon, canned sardines, fresh herring, lake trout, blue fin or albacore tuna) and plant-based protein from foods such as lentils, chickpeas, tofu, tempeh, veggie burgers, and wheat-gluten