Breast Cancer: the crucial role of lifestyle

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An important study performed with 31,000 women confirmed the major impact that lifestyle has on the risk of breast cancer after menopause. Cancer is truly a chronic disease whose development can be prevented with simple changes to lifestyle.

In Canada, as in every other Western country, one woman in nine will see her life overwhelmed by a diagnosis of breast cancer.

POSTMENOPAUSAL CANCER

Although younger women are not safe from this disease this cancer hits particularly hard against women after menopause, with an incidence two to three times greater than that before the age of 50.

This large increase in breast cancer is, however, not seen in other regions of the world, notably so in Asia. In Japan, for example, the death rate associated with breast cancer does not increase significantly with age, to the point that even at an advanced age (75 years or more), these women are five times less likely to be affected by this cancer than are women in Western countries. Their cancer risk is increased by a factor of four if they have migrated to a Western country, indicating that three quarters of the breast cancer cases are associated with lifestyle. The increase in breast cancer incidence observed after menopause is thus not an inevitable consequence of aging or of heredity, but is rather a disease whose development seems to be strongly influenced by the Western lifestyle.

ANTICANCER LIFESTYLE

In 2007, a report from the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) proposed 10 sweeping recommendations designed to reduce the burden of cancer in the world, including 6 behaviours which were recommended for the entire population[1]:

1. Remain as thin as possible, with a body mass index below 23.
2. Be physically active at least 30 minutes of each day.
3. Avoid carbonated drinks and reduce the consumption of food rich in energy (junk food, for example).
4. Consume, in abundance, a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, beans/peas as well as foods made with whole wheat grains.
5. Reduce the consumption of red meats to about 500 g per week and avoid delicatessen meats completely.
6. Limit daily alcohol consumption to 2 glasses of wine for men and 1 for women.

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Life style can reduce the probability of breast cancer by 60%.

IMPACT ON BREAST CANCER

The actual impact of these six recommendations on the risk of breast cancer was recently measured using a group of 30,797 post-menopausal women between 50 and 76 years of age[1]. After having analyzed in detail 10 years of the dietary habits, weights and level of physical activity of the women who participated in the study, the scientists observed that following the WCRF recommendations was associated with a remarkable reduction in the risk of breast cancer. For instance, limiting alcohol consumption to a single glass was associated with a reduction of 37% in the risk of cancer; a diet rich in plant-based foods diminished the risk by 21%, while maintaining a normal body weight was associated with a reduction of 13%. Even more importantly, the effects of these good habits were additive, since women who followed three or more recommendations saw their breast cancer risk decline by 60%!

These observations confirm the immense potential of simple modifications in lifestyle on the risk of breast cancer. And these remarkable reductions in cancer risk can also be further extended by the inclusion of foods like soya, cruciferous vegetables and fish oil, all of which are clearly associated with a reduced risk of cancer. For example, one recent analysis of several published studies found that weekly consumption of one to two portions of fish rich in omega-3 oil is associated with a 14% reduction in the risk of breast cancer[2]. In the face of this formidable disease, why do we wait to make prevention our priority?

(1) Hastert, TA et al. Adherence to WCRF/AICR cancer prevention recommendations and risk of post-menopausal breast cancer. Canc. Epidem. Biomarkers Prev.2013; 22(9):1498-1508.

(2) Zheng, J-S etal. Intake of fish and marine n-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids and risk of breast cancer: meta-analysis of data from 21 independent prospective cohort studies. BMJ 2013; 346:f3706.

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