



Over half of colon cancer cases can be prevented through lifestyle changes.  
PICTURE CREDIT: FREEPIK.

# Colon cancer linked to diet and lifestyle

**W**E are what we eat. Colon health is heavily linked to the diet we consume. To keep colon diseases at bay, it's important to maintain a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, nuts, fish, poultry and vegetable oils.

It is also crucial to keep alcohol intake at moderate levels and minimise the consumption of red and processed meats.

Columbia Asia Hospital-Puchong consultant gastroenterologist and hepatologist Dr Cheong Kuan Loong says additionally, quitting smoking, staying active, and maintaining a healthy weight can go a long way towards preserving colon health.

Maintaining a healthy colon is important in fighting off colon cancer, he adds.

Colon cancer is the second most common and third most lethal cancer in Malaysia as reported in the Malaysian National Cancer Registry Report 2007-2011. Over half of colon cancer cases can be prevented through lifestyle changes.

Here are seven lifestyle tips to reduce your risk of developing colon cancer.

## INCORPORATE GREENS AND FRUITS

Consuming vegetables and fruits can significantly reduce the risk of colon cancer by providing potential anti-carcinogenic agents such as dietary fibre, antioxidants and essential nutrients.

Studies indicate that eating 90gm of wholegrains daily can lower the risk of colorectal cancer by 17 per cent.

It is recommended to consume three or more servings of wholegrains each day and to get 22 to 34gm of fibre daily, depending on age and sex.

On the other hand, diets high in red and processed meats, such as hotdogs and bacon, are linked to a higher risk



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Limit meat consumption to less than three servings per week.

## STAY ACTIVE

Research indicates that regular exercise benefits heart health and aids in weight maintenance.

It may also help reduce the risk of certain cancers, including colon cancer. Aim for 30 minutes of moderate exercise most days of the week.

The American Cancer Society says carrying extra weight increases the risk of colon cancer, as well as cancers of the rectum, oesophagus, pancreas, kidney and breast in postmenopausal women.

## LOSE WEIGHT

A 2023 study published in the 'Nature' science journal involving over three million participants, found that the incidence of colon cancer is higher among obese individuals.

Notably, losing just five to 10 per

cent of total body weight can reduce one's cancer risk.

Aim for a healthy body mass index, typically between 18.5 and 24.9, to lower your chances of developing colon cancer.

Studies also indicate that individuals with larger waistlines have an increased risk of various diseases, including heart disease and cancer.

A healthy waist measurement is less than 40 inches (101.6 cm) for men and less than 35 inches (88.9 cm) for women.

## LIMIT ALCOHOL AND QUIT SMOKING

Drinking moderately is advocated, with no more than one drink per day for women or two drinks per day for men. Overindulging in alcohol can lead to dire consequences for your colon.

It's also essential to avoid smoking altogether, as tobacco is a significant risk factor for colon cancer.

To safeguard health, educate people to stay away from smoking, steer clear of secondhand smoke and support family members in quitting the habit.

## ENSURE ADEQUATE HYDRATION

Maintaining hydration is essential for a healthy colon.

Hydration not only prevents and alleviates constipation but also reduces the risk of colon cancer, supports regular bowel movements and enhances digestive wellbeing.

Women should aim for an average intake of nine cups of fluids per day, while men should target around 13 cups.

This recommendation includes fluids obtained from food sources as well.

Typically, eight cups a day is recommended for maintaining hydration in healthy, average individuals.

However, those with certain medical conditions, like heart or kidney

issues, may need to limit intake.

Conversely, increased physical activity or exposure to hot weather may necessitate consuming more than eight cups daily.

## PRIORITISE REGULAR SCREENING

Regular screening tests for colon cancer are among the most cost-effective measures in combating this disease. Screening for colon cancer should start at 50 years and continue until age 75.

The two primary screening tools recommended are a colonoscopy and faecal occult blood testing.

Colonoscopy, in particular, can detect and eliminate pre-cancerous growths called polyps before they develop into cancer, thereby lowering the risk of colon cancer.

## STRESS MANAGEMENT AND SUPPLEMENTS

While stress itself has not been proven to cause cancer, its impact on our behaviour can be significant.

When we are feeling low, we often resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as bingeing on junk food,

chain-smoking, alcohol abuse

exercise and inadequate sleep. It is believed that these behaviours can lead to an increased risk of opening cancer.

The notion that calcium and D intake can prevent colon cancer is another common misconception.

The evidence supporting effectiveness in combating colon cancer is not robust enough.

However, individuals should consume 1,000 to 1,200mg of calcium and approximately 1,000 IU of D daily for other health benefits as preventing bone loss in postmenopausal women.

Good sources of calcium include low-fat dairy and fortified plant milks, nuts, beans and green leafy vegetables. Furthermore, good sources of vitamin D include eggs, fatty fish (like tuna) and fortified dairy products.

While a standard multivitamin supplement can help fill in deficiencies, it should complement, not replace, a diet rich in real foods for optimal health.

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A diet rich in fruits and vegetables is highly recommended. PICTURE CREDIT: FREEPIK.