



TOI TE ORA
PUBLIC HEALTH
Bay of Plenty + Lakes Districts

Medical Officer of Health Report
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Preventing Cancer

A recent report from the World Cancer Research Fund (prepared jointly with the American Institute for Cancer Research) estimates that between 30 and 50 per cent of all cancers are preventable. Not smoking or using any form of tobacco (and avoiding second hand exposure) is the most important action. The next most important means of reducing cancer risk is to maintain a healthy weight throughout life by consuming a healthy diet (one that is rich in whole grains, vegetables, fruit and beans) and being physically active. Being overweight or obese increases the risk of cancer in twelve different organs. Included in their dietary advice is to limit consumption of fast foods, processed foods high in fat, starches or sugar; red and processed meat; sugar-sweetened drinks; and alcohol intake. They also recommend not taking high dose dietary supplements; instead focus on meeting nutritional needs through diet alone. Next is limiting exposure to long term infections (such as helicobacter pylori which causes stomach ulcers), radiation, sun and tanning machines, and industrial chemicals. The expert panel adds that individuals diagnosed with cancer will still gain benefit from following all of the above recommendations, and concludes by stressing the importance of breastfeeding for babies (it also protects against some cancers in women).

The World Cancer Fund Report is an update of previous reports completed in 1997 and 2007. Cancer is responsible for about one in eight deaths across the globe. Wealthier countries, such as New Zealand, have the highest incidence of cancer with this being related to smoking rates, adverse nutrition and weight patterns, and the age of the population. Cancer is a disease process, the risk of which increases with age. Unfortunately, as low and middle income countries get wealthier their populations tend to adopt the unhealthy practices of high income countries such as tobacco smoking, increased consumption of alcohol, and a diet high in sugar, animal fat and red meat.

Screening programmes assist with the early detection of some cancers and this along with improved treatments means that survival rates for many cancers continue to improve. However, given that we know what causes so many cancers we really should be putting more emphasis on prevention. The recommendations of the World Cancer Fund are not difficult to understand. Nor do they require the expenditure of significant amounts of money. What they will rely on is policy leadership from governments, business and health services so that populations are nudged to make the necessary fundamental behaviour changes.

For instance the move of DHBs to remove sugar sweetened beverages and dramatically improve the food that's available in our cafeterias is a significant step in the right direction. We haven't gone as far as we need to yet, but real progress has been made in the past couple of years. This definitely helps our staff and visitors improve their nutritional status as well as showing leadership to other businesses, schools and the general population. It's also a good example of such difficult decisions not necessarily costing lots of money. The Healthy Living Team is developing a travel plan for the DHB the overall aim of which is to encourage staff and visitors to be more physically

active on a daily basis. With reference to the recommendations of the World Cancer Research Fund report what else could the DHB do? Well, the retail pharmacy in Tauranga Hospital still actively markets dietary and vitamin supplements of questionable efficacy. This needs to be challenged. All health professionals should encourage every patient to decrease their alcohol consumption, and the message for every pregnant women should be to abstain from alcohol completely. We already have a target for the proportion of babies being breastfed, but we're not meeting it for Maori.

Addressing several of these cancer prevention recommendations will have other unintended positive consequences. The production of animal fat and protein has significant detrimental impacts on the environment. Much deforestation in the world is about creating pasture for farm animals. Intensive farming practices lead to excess animal effluent entering waterways and methane, from cattle in particular is a major contributor to climate change. Reducing our consumption of red meat and dairy products will also reduce heart disease risk.

Here is the full report of the World Cancer Research Fund
<https://www.wcrf.org/dietandcancer/about>

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