

Advice on Heart Health After Cancer Treatment

Which cancer treatments can increase your risk of heart disease? How can diet and exercise reduce that risk? A Fred Hutch expert explains.

March 2, 2026 By Fred Hutch News Service and Laura Martinell, RD

Sadly, certain treatments for cancer can put you at risk for developing heart-related diseases. Diet and lifestyle also impact your risk of developing heart disease.

Cancer treatments that can increase your risk include:

- Certain chemotherapy medications
- Radiation
- Aromatase inhibitors
- Androgen deprivation therapy
- Immunosuppressive medications
- Steroids

Health conditions that can increase risk include:

- High LDL cholesterol
- High triglycerides
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Diabetes
- Overweight status
- Physical inactivity
- Smoking

In most cases, the impacts of cancer treatments can't be avoided, because killing the cancer is the highest priority. However, certain lifestyle changes can help reduce your risk of developing heart disease from treatment. To understand how diet impacts your heart, it's best to first discuss the types of nutrients found in food.

Fats

Generally, fats fall into two main categories: saturated and unsaturated fats. Saturated fats are found primarily in animal products like meat and dairy (and some plant foods such as coconut oil and palm oil), but they are often hidden in processed foods, such as commercial baked goods, crackers and even microwave popcorn.

If a food is shelf-stable, ultra creamy, very flaky or has chocolate, it probably contains more saturated fat than you think. Unsaturated fats are mostly found in plant foods, such as nuts, seeds and vegetable oils. There are two types of unsaturated fats: monounsaturated and polyunsaturated.

Monounsaturated fats are found in:

- Olive, peanut, and canola oil
- Avocados
- Nuts and seeds

Polyunsaturated fats are found in:

- Sunflower, corn, soybean and flaxseed oils
- Walnuts
- Flax seeds
- Fish

Experts recommend limiting your saturated fat intake to less than 10% of your total calories and focus on food sources that are higher in mono- and polyunsaturated fats (which include omega-3 fats).

Studies show that when saturated fats are replaced with unsaturated fats, especially

polyunsaturated fats, it can lower “bad” LDL cholesterol and increase “good” HDL cholesterol. Most people don’t eat enough LDL-lowering unsaturated fats, so consider increasing your intake of these beneficial foods. Learn more about healthy fats (and find recipes!) at Fred Hutch’s [Cook for Your Life](#).

During treatment, a higher fat diet might be recommended to better meet your calorie needs. Generally, if your dietitian asks you to add these fats, the benefit of adding them outweighs the risk to your cardiovascular health.

Fiber

Another important nutrient for heart health is fiber, and it’s only found in plant foods. There are two main types: soluble and insoluble.

Soluble fiber helps lower cholesterol by binding to the cholesterol in your gut and moving it out of the body. Oats, barley, beans, lentils and fruit contain soluble fiber. Insoluble fiber can keep your bowel movements regular and make you feel full and satisfied. Examples of healthy fiber-filled foods are whole grains, nuts, seeds, legumes, fruits and vegetables.

Exercise and heart disease

A study in 2019 from the American Heart Association (AHA) determined that exercise can lessen the toxic effects of cancer treatment on the cardiovascular system and is also an essential part of recovery after treatment. The study found that “encouraging cancer survivors to be more active, sit less and take more steps every day could be a feasible approach for prolonging survivorship and reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease mortality.”

The AHA study also found that at least one hour of moderate to vigorous activity each day, such as biking or brisk walking, reduced the risk of death from heart disease and stroke by 60% and other causes by 40%.

Fred Hutch experts also tout the benefits of exercise. “Exercise not only helps bone strength, but also heart health and muscles,” said [Hanna Hunter, MD](#), the medical director of our [Cancer Rehabilitation Program](#) in a 2024 Fred Hutch news article. “It ripples into so many domains related

to quality of life. It improves energy levels, it gives you better sleep, it improves mood, decreases the risk of falling. It allows you to do the things you want to do.”

There are other factors that contribute to heart disease with cancer treatment beyond nutrition and physical activity, so be sure to always discuss with your oncology or [Survivorship care team](#).

Fred Hutch experts recommend a diet that emphasizes high fiber plant foods (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds) and more plant fats and fish a couple of times per week. Minimizing foods high in saturated fats (meat, butter, beef tallow), sugar, refined carbohydrates and ultra-processed foods, coupled with exercise, tends to be the most beneficial for heart health.

Here are some heart health recipes found at [Cook For Your Life](#):

- [Collard Greens and White Bean Soup](#)
- [Salmon Burger with Cabbage Fennel Slaw](#)
- [Wilted Chard Salad with Walnuts](#)
- [Lentil Avocado Salad](#)

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