

BEATING CANCER WITH PROPER NUTRITION

Worldwide, the month of February is dedicated to raising awareness about cancer to promote prevention, early diagnosis and early proper treatment or management of the condition. As the month comes to an end, **Jacky Achan and Lillian N. Magezi** focus on nutrition for people living with cancer

When on treatment with cancer drugs, many patients suffer side-effects such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea or constipation, lack of appetite and having a metallic taste in the mouth, which may adversely affect food intake.

Besides the side-effects of treatment, the American Cancer Society states that a poor appetite can also be caused by a changed sense of taste or smell, feeling full, tumour growth or dehydration.

But it can also be made worse by many things, such as having trouble swallowing, depression or pain.

Importance of proper nutrition

Treatment works by destroying rapidly growing cells in the body such as cancer cells. However, it also destroys normal body cells that grow rapidly such as the hair cells and bone marrow (where blood is made) and those that line the small intestines.

Consequently, as Janet Nankoma, a senior nursing officer at the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), explains, a patient will experience hair loss and have a

low blood count.

Therefore, patients must eat a balanced diet and enough food to repair the body and ensure blood supply to sustain them through treatment.

"We actually do not give treatment to patients whose blood level is low," Nankoma adds.

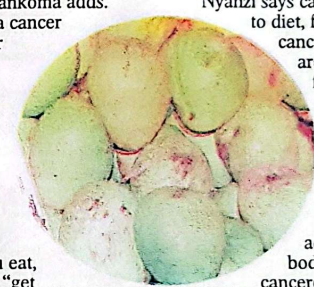
Alfred Jatho, a cancer health educator at the UCI, explains that when it comes to nutrition in cancer treatment, focus should be on quantity, variety and quality of food.

"So when you eat, make sure you "get your fill and get satisfied." It is also important that you have a variety of food depending on what is available. You will need body building foods (proteins); energy-giving foods (carbohydrates) and vitamins or protective foods (vegetables and fruits)," Jatho

advises.

Vegetables and fruits are also rich in vitamins E and C, which are vital for people living with cancer, according to Lillian Nakayiki Nyanzi, a nutritionist with Neulife Medical Centre in Bweyogerere, Kampala.

Nyanzi says cancers related to diet, for example cancer of the colon, are as a result of free radicals/oxidising agents, found in the food one eats. She explains that when these agents accumulate in the body, they become cancerous. Therefore, she encourages the consumption of foods



One should eat plenty of fruits

rich in antioxidants, which are known to neutralise the free radicals. Nyanzi says examples of antioxidants include vitamin E from nuts, seeds, vegetables, fish oils and whole grains. Others are vitamin C from citrus fruits

such as oranges and tangerines, in addition to other fruits like mangoes, passion fruits, watermelons, pineapples, apples, yellow bananas, avocados and pawpaws.

In addition, she says antioxidants are also found in vegetables such as carrots, tomatoes and spinach. She says people living with cancer are advised to have at least two servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

Dr Henry Ddungu, a haematologist at the cancer institute, adds that people living with cancer need a balanced diet with lots of fruits.

Do fruits such as jackfruit and soursop (ekitaferi) cure cancer?

Dr Nixon Niyonzima, a cancer biologist UCI, and Joseph Mary Semujju, a nutritionist at UCI, explain that there are no foods that can cure cancer. However, they add that foods that boost immunity, which are mainly fruits and vegetables, are important in

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