

HEALTH



From far left: tofu, barbecued meat, chicken, coffee, sugar and ham. Photo: Corbis

NOXIOUS NOSHING

Many simple foods are rumoured to trigger cancer. But is there any scientific evidence to support the claims, asks **Sasha Gonzales**

So much has been written about what to eat to prevent cancer that most of us could doubtless name some of these foods. From green tea to cabbage, the anti-cancer foods issue has had so much hype that it is more or less accepted as the truth.

It's the same story with foods that are thought to cause or increase our risk of the disease. Certain foods have been demonised in the media, causing paranoia among the public and, indeed, among cancer patients.

But is there any truth to these beliefs or are our fears largely unfounded?

Clinical oncologist Dr Victor Hsue says that much of what is reported in the media is merely speculation or hype – and not rooted in scientific evidence.

How do we separate fact from fiction? Hsue advises to look out for claims that are difficult to verify and not backed up with scientific proof.

These eight foods have come under the spotlight in recent

years for their supposed links with cancer. There is no evidence to suggest that they can cause the disease yet it is widely believed that they should not be consumed for this reason.

Here, we debate the most common cancer food myths:

Sugar

We have been told that sugar feeds cancer cells and should be avoided, and many cancer patients believe this claim. In 2008, the international chapter of the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) funded a study on food avoidance behaviour among cancer patients and found that sugar is one of the most common foods boycotted.

But according to Patricia Chiu, manager of health information and education at WCRF Hong Kong, sugar intake has not been shown to increase the progression of cancer.

Of course, all sugary items – honey, candy and fizzy drinks – should be consumed in moderation because they can lead to weight gain. And being overweight or obese can

increase one's risk of several cancers. A cancer patient undergoing treatment may have special nutritional requirements, so Chiu advises speaking to a doctor or dietitian before cutting out sugar entirely.

Barbecued meat

Charring or cooking meat over an open flame changes its molecular structure, forming heterocyclic amines and polycyclic hydrocarbons that are thought to increase one's risk of stomach cancer.

Chiu says that, to date, there is limited and inconsistent evidence that barbecued animal meat directly causes stomach cancer.

Soya bean products

Many claims have been made about soya bean-based foods, says Hsue. While some people claim these foods can reduce one's risk of breast, prostate, ovarian and uterine cancer, they have also been associated with an increase in the growth of breast tumours. So far, there is no strong evidence to support either claim, says Chiu.

Soya foods contain isoflavones (a class of phytoestrogens), which may act like the female sex hormone, oestrogen. But they also have

anti-oestrogen properties. As part of a healthy diet, a moderate intake (one to two servings a day) of soya foods, such as soya milk and tofu, is fine.

However, soya or phytoestrogen supplements should be avoided if you are a survivor of oestrogen receptor-positive breast cancer, adds Chiu, because it is still not known whether soya foods affect cancer risk and survival.

Chiu says experts usually advise women who have had this type of breast cancer against consuming excessive amounts of soya. And particularly against supplements, because very little is yet known about their effects. Breast cancer survivors should consult their oncologist if they have any concerns.

Foods that contain hormones

Chicken is widely thought to contain high levels of growth hormones. But this is not the case because the use of hormones was banned in chicken farms in Hong Kong in the 1980s, says Chiu. According to a report by the Centre for Food Safety, no hormone residues were detected from chicken samples obtained from local markets.

Chiu says most hormones are fat-soluble, so if you are still

worried about residue, trim the fat off chicken pieces before cooking them.

Cows' milk is another food that some people question because it contains recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH), a synthetic hormone used to boost milk production. But Hsue says the amount of rBGH in milk is reportedly very low and is unlikely to have any effect if ingested.

Bird's nest

Protein-rich bird's nest is said to increase the chance of a cancer recurring. It is believed to "nourish" cancer cells, thus promoting cell growth. Chiu says that very limited research exists on this subject and that the findings are inconclusive. More research is needed before any firm conclusions can be made.

Bird's nest is meant to 'nourish' cancer cells, but research on this is limited

According to Hsue, it is not just bird's nest but other nutrient-rich foods, such as fish maw and sea cucumber, that people avoid, as they are thought to "feed" cancer cells.

If you are a cancer patient, Hsue warns against depriving yourself of healthy foods. This can lower your immunity against cancer and also slow down your recovery from surgery, radiotherapy or chemotherapy.

Smoked foods

According to WCRF's Second Expert Report, smoked foods – meats, in particular – may contain cancer-causing polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, depending on the fuel used to produce the smoke. Smoked meats are often salted or cured, and some think they are likely to lead to the formation of carcinogenic compounds in the stomach.

Still, Chiu says, there has been limited evidence that smoked foods do indeed cause stomach cancer. It is, therefore, acceptable to consume smoked foods in small amounts.

Coffee

Reports have suggested that drinking coffee can cause bladder and pancreatic cancer,

but Chiu says that, once again, the evidence is still inconsistent.

In other studies, researchers have found that coffee can actually reduce the risk of some cancers. According to the latest findings in the WCRF Continuous Update Project report on endometrial cancer, drinking the brew can lower the risk of uterus-related cancer.

However, there is still insufficient information to recommend drinking coffee as a preventative measure. A study by the American Cancer Society last year found a link between drinking coffee and a reduced risk of oral cancer.

Fermented and preserved foods

Certainly, fresh food is always healthier and more preferable to preserved or fermented goods, but Hsue says that the occasional meal of ham, pickles, sausages, bread and cheese is unlikely to do any harm.

Chiu, however, warns that, because such processed foods are high in sodium, they should be consumed in moderation.

According to a WCRF Hong Kong survey last year on salt and sodium-heavy condiments, diets containing large amounts of salted foods could be linked to one's risk of stomach cancer. life@scmp.com

How to get ahead with your haircare regime

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After years of taking care of your skin, you've managed to stave off unsightly fine lines and wrinkles. But are you doing the same for your hair? If haircare companies have their way, every woman in Asia will soon be giving their locks the same kind of care they give their skin. In the past couple of years, the beauty and wellness industries have released many products claiming to turn ageing hair around.

From scalp tonics to leave-in conditioners, the market has seen a flood of products that claim to give users a thicker, healthier head of hair. Which begs the question: can hair even look and feel younger to begin with, or are haircare companies merely playing to our desire to turn back the clock?

Leonica Kei, director and senior trichologist at the Philip Kingsley Trichological Centre in Singapore, says most anti-ageing haircare products work externally, ensuring that the scalp is healthy and that the hair is strong, supple and shiny.

"Many over-the-counter products are limited in this way, because they do not nourish the scalp or hair from within, but have a cosmetic effect. But some scalp tonics do help improve blood circulation and there are products that can help protect the hair from sun damage, which ages hair," says Kei.

Hair might just be dead keratin but, like skin, it does age. After the age of 30, hair tends to become finer and thinner as a result of a natural shrinkage of the hair follicles.

Several pharmacy and salon brands have launched anti-ageing haircare lines for men and women, among them Shiseido, Redken, Matrix and L'Oréal Paris.

These products incorporate some of the ingredients found in anti-ageing skincare products, and are designed to enhance the look and texture of hair. Matrix Biolage Rejuvenating Age Rejuvenating Shampoo and Conditioner, for example, helps deliver anti-ageing nutrients to the scalp and hair, from

root to tip, protect against environmental damage, and soften and moisturise dry locks.

Redken Time Reset Youth Revitalizer, a rinse-out mask, is loaded with strengthening peptides and ceramides to repair damaged hair, and camellia oil to replenish moisture and leave hair silky and glossy.

Phyto's Phytodensium Anti-aging Serum works to boost the level of melanin in each hair shaft, delaying the appearance of greys, thanks to pro-vitamins B5 and B6 combined with a tyrosine derivative. Let's also not forget the plethora of hair colouring products, hair growth boosters and even hair sunscreens on shop shelves.

And there is more to come. According to a 2009 report by Global Industry Analysts, the global anti-ageing products market is expected to be worth about US\$291.9 billion by 2015. This market includes skincare and haircare products, as well as supplements for age-related health conditions.

Many over-the-counter products do not nourish the scalp or hair from within

LEONICA KEI, TRICHOLOGIST



Look after your health to ensure good hair. Photo: Iwasaki Makot

In Hong Kong, hair salons and spas also offer a selection of services designed to combat age-related hair problems.

Kim Robinson's 60-minute Volume & Stimulate treatment uses special massage techniques and tonics to stimulate hair growth, boost volume and delay thinning, while the J.F. Lazartique Treatment Centre in Central provides a range of scalp and hair treatments to address specific concerns.

Kei says that while many of these products and services may be effective at treating the signs of ageing hair, they are not the complete answer. "It really starts from within," she says. "Factors like stress, hormonal changes and diet all play a part in determining hair health."

If your diet is lacking in protein, iron, vitamins and minerals, for example, or if you have an unhealthy, stressful lifestyle, your hair will look dull and lifeless no matter what products you take to it. "Hair follicles need to be nourished, and this is why a nutrient-rich diet is so important," Kei adds.

Do not underestimate the damage sunlight can do to hair, either. Heat and UV rays have a drying effect on hair, causing discoloration and brittleness. Each hair strand is made up of many layers within which moisture and pigments are stored, says Kei. An outer scale-like layer called the cuticle protects these inner layers.

When heat and UV rays hit the cuticle, they dry it out, and when this dry, exterior layer peels off, it can leave the internal layers exposed and more vulnerable to damage.

Unfortunately, when the damage is excessive, it is usually irreversible. Extremely dry hair breaks easily as it is structurally weak, and the resulting dullness and coarseness can add years to the look of your hair.

The best way to keep your locks in good condition is to stick to a good diet and a balanced lifestyle, keep your hair out of the sun, and use products that maintain colour and vitality.

The time will come when there will be very little you can do. But the more care you give it now, the longer your hair will remain youthful.

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