

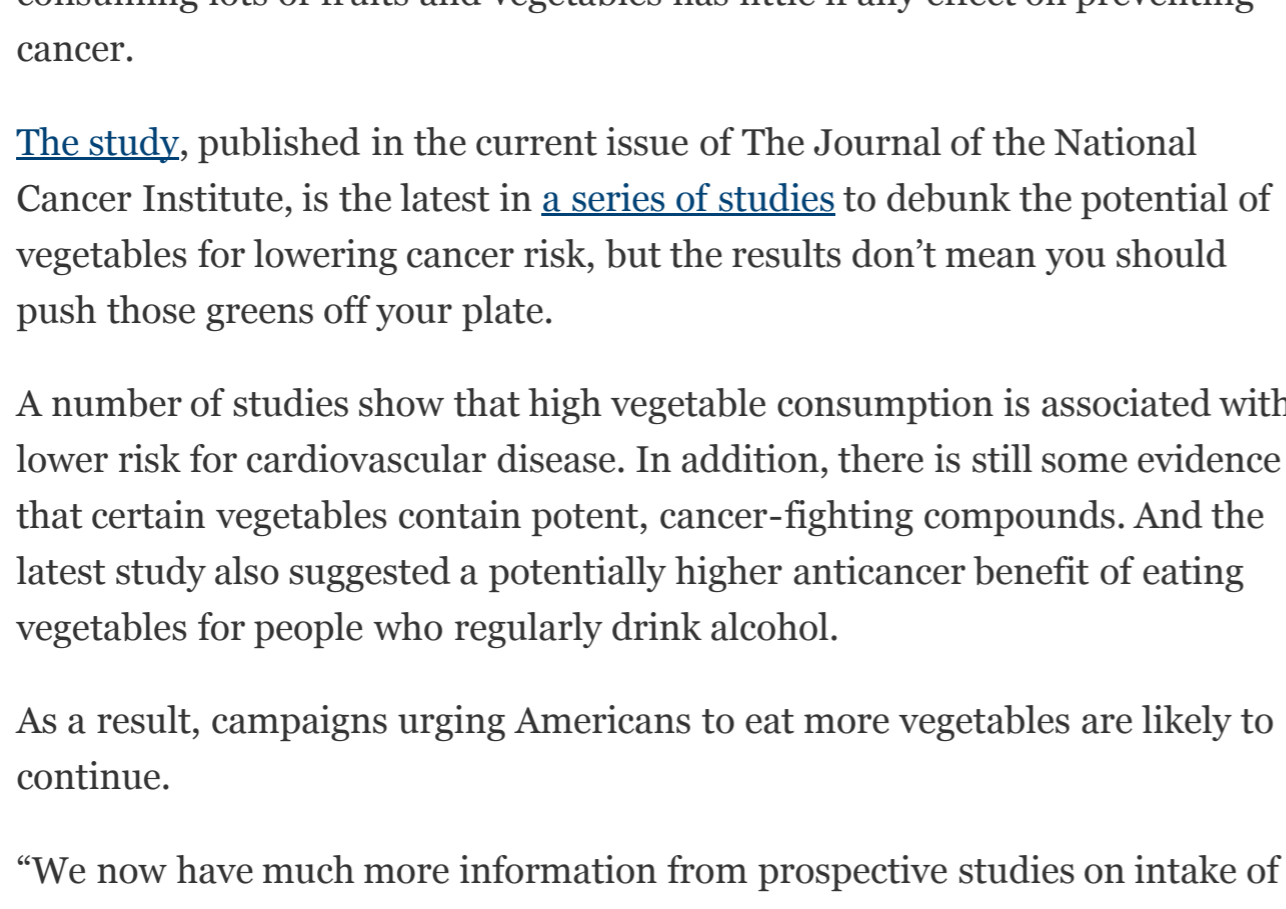
Well

Tara Parker-Pope on Health

April 8, 2010, 7:08 AM

Eating Vegetables Doesn't Stop Cancer

By TARA PARKER-POPE



Randy Harms for The New York Times. Eating more veggies probably won't prevent cancer, but it may improve your heart health.

A major study tracking the eating habits of 478,000 Europeans suggests that consuming lots of fruits and vegetables has little if any effect on preventing cancer.

The study, published in the current issue of The Journal of the National Cancer Institute, is the latest in a series of studies to debunk the potential of vegetables for lowering cancer risk, but the results don't mean you should push those greens off your plate.

A number of studies show that high vegetable consumption is associated with lower risk for cardiovascular disease. In addition, there is still some evidence that certain vegetables contain potent, cancer-fighting compounds. And the latest study also suggested a potentially higher anticancer benefit of eating vegetables for people who regularly drink alcohol.

As a result, campaigns urging Americans to eat more vegetables are likely to continue.

"We now have much more information from prospective studies on intake of fruits and vegetables in relation to risk of cardiovascular disease," said Dr. Walter C. Willett, chairman of the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. "Thus the advice should continue, but the benefit will be primarily for heart disease and stroke."

The European study tracked 142,605 men and 335,873 women for an average of nearly nine years. Eating more vegetables was associated with a small but statistically significant reduction in cancer risk. The data translates into a 4 percent lower risk of cancer for every two extra servings of vegetables a day a person eats.

While the findings suggest at least a small lower risk of cancer among those who eat lots of vegetables, the slight difference could be explained by a number of variables, like reporting errors among the study subjects or the fact that vegetable eaters also are less likely to smoke or drink to excess. In addition, a 4 percent reduction in relative risk offers very little practical benefit to an individual. For instance, a person with a 10 percent risk of getting cancer over the next eight years would, at best, lower his or her risk to just 9.6 percent by eating two extra servings of vegetables a day.

Dr. Willett noted that the study results don't speak to the potential of specific types of vegetables and fruits in reducing cancer risk. For example, several studies over the years have suggested that lycopene from tomatoes may lower prostate cancer risk.

In addition, because the study focused on vegetable consumption during adulthood, it doesn't tell us much about the effect of high vegetable consumption during childhood and the teenage years.

"Multiple lines of evidence indicate that ionizing radiation and some other risk factors for cancer can operate primarily in childhood and early adult life," Dr. Willett wrote in an accompanying editorial. "Thus, antioxidants or other protective constituents of fruits and vegetables may need to be present at that time to be effective."

Most important is the fact that a large body of evidence shows that increasing vegetable consumption is good for your heart. In 2004, Harvard researchers reported on data collected from more than 100,000 nurses and doctors. Although the study showed no link between cancer risk and vegetable consumption, eating five or more fruit and vegetable servings daily was associated with a 30 percent lower risk of heart disease or stroke compared to those who ate less than 1.5 servings a day.

In 1997, a randomized trial of 500 adults showed that increasing fruit and vegetable intake lowered blood pressure compared with study subjects who ate a typical American diet that is high in fat and low in vegetables.

E-mail This | Print | Share | Twitter | Recommend

Eat Well, Discuss!, vegetables

RELATED POSTS

FROM WELL: For Beets, a Little More Respect, Please

Lying About Your Vegetables

Getting the Most Out of Vegetables

The Farmers' Market Effect

Would You Like Your Veggies Plain or Sauced?

Previous post: Binge Eating During Sleep | Next post: Paperwork vs. Patients

From 1 to 25 of 157 Comments

1 2 3 ... 7 Next >

1. April 8, 2010 8:11 am Link Just one study. Stay calm. There are thousands of nutrients in whole foods that have not yet been identified. We are still in our infancy regarding the links between diet and disease.

Using common sense, it a good idea to fill up on veggies: they are low in calories and high in nutrients. Unlike many other TAF (typical American foods), you can buy veggies that are whole and fresh just like they came out of the ground or off the vine.

And it is good to look at the big picture: read the 2010 report at American Institute of Cancer Research (www.AICR.org).

I will still stake my future on tons of fruits and veggies each day combined with whole grains and moderate amount of dairy or meat. I will still seek the least processed foods and eat a variety of fresh foods.

— Ellie Taylor

2. April 8, 2010 8:17 am Link You've gotta be kidding. The Journal of the National Cancer Institute is probably going to tell us that some expensive treatment or prescription IS good a preventing cancer. Sorry. I'm not buying it.

— Laura

3. April 8, 2010 8:26 am Link If Willett stopped focusing on fruits and vegetables while promoting gobbling up huge amounts of polysaturated fat he might actually stumble upon something that truly does protect against cancer — a diet very low in polysaturated fat (less than 2% of calories).

Oxidants, carcinogens, etc. are only part of the cancer picture. The other half of that component is your body's reaction, or over-reaction in the case of high tissue concentration of polysaturated fat (and easy oxidation and lipid peroxidation) to cellular damage — be it from infection, allergy, sleep apnea, injury, or what have you.

Our best defense against cancer as well as all inflammatory diseases is to eat a low-polysaturated fat diet — while getting plenty of nutrients from veggies too of course :)

— Matt Stone

4. April 8, 2010 9:07 am Link Don't get all excited about the results of this study. Like Dr. Christopher Gardner of Stanford will tell you—you just can't rely on studies based on "self-reported diet diaries".

The only kind of study that would be valid would be if you could supply the foods you wanted to test and force-feed them to 100,000 people for 20 years. Not likely!

Here's my point—not all fruits and vegetables are created equal.

Ever hear of the ORAC Index—Oxygen Radical Absorbancy Index—that ranks fruits and vegetables by their ability to neutralize damaging free radicals? Or the ANDI Scale?

Eating a diet high in kale, collards, Swiss chard, berries, apples, sweet potatoes, and broccoli sprouts is a lot different than eating iceberg lettuce, bananas, white potatoes, and orange juice. What exactly did these people eat?

To get the antioxidant comparisons on fruits and vegetables take a look at:

"What the Experts Say About Getting the Most Antioxidants from Our Food. Why We Need Them — How to Best Absorb Them — Cooked or Raw? — Why Organic Matters — The ORAC Index — and the Oz Diet"

http://www.happyhealthylonglife.com/happy_healthy_long_and

"Straight from the Experts at Ohio State University, Johns Hopkins University, & Canyon Ranch: Three "New-to-Me" Super Foods: Black Raspberries, Broccoli Sprouts, & Chicory-Family Leafy Greens"

These fruits & vegetables have been shown to have an effect on cancer cells.

http://www.happyhealthylonglife.com/happy_healthy_long_foods.html

— The Healthy Librarian

5. April 8, 2010 9:08 am Link This review is overly simplistic. It all depends on the type of vegetable. Root and leafy veggies do little to reduce cancer risk. However, cruciferous vegetables and those that belong to the Allium family (garlic, onions, leeks, etc) DO reduce cancer risk, by inducing Phase 2 enzymes in our body that prevent carcinogenic agents from binding to our DNA.

— Shana

6. April 8, 2010 9:10 am Link Maybe this will stop some of the self righteous posts from those who are sure they will never get cancer due to their healthy living. Cancer is complicated. You can't control every risk factor.

— Jango

7. April 8, 2010 9:12 am Link Even if this study showed veggies do not necessarily decrease the risk of cancer, eating veggies will help lead to healthier behaviors and a healthier weight, meaning less stress on the body, which no doubt will help decrease one's chances of veggies. It's all those processed foods that are causing us cancer.

— FoodFitnessFreshair

8. April 8, 2010 9:14 am Link There is an important piece of information missing from your article and possibly missing from the study; that is the amount of meat consumption by the study's participants. There are many well controlled studies that show that cancer risk is reduced not simply by increasing vegetable and fruit consumption, but also by limiting or eliminating the consumption of animal protein. It is unclear whether or not these investigators tracked the consumption of animal protein among their study's cohort, if they did not, this is a serious flaw in the study.

Furthermore, I think the headline of your article is misleading and irresponsible. Inserting the words "may not" would have been a more accurate and responsible headline.

— William Stannon

9. April 8, 2010 9:14 am Link I don't think it matters if eating veggies helps cut the risk of cancer. I'd rather eat the best I can (i.e wholesome, natural foods) than stuff my body with processed by-products. Treat your body with some respect everyday! (Not just to protect it from diseases)

— SR

10. April 8, 2010 9:15 am Link Well duh! Yet another study. No one really knows how to stop cancer...it has a mind of its own.

— mauricio

11. April 8, 2010 9:15 am Link Cut way way back on red meat, stop the white bread madness, try cut out/way back on saturated/hydrogenated products, no artificial sweeteners (unless medically necessary), no sodas, no barbeque, limit alcohol, exercise, keep weight normal. Screw the vegetables.

— r

12. April 8, 2010 9:18 am Link This comes as no surprise to followers of Paleo (Paleolithic) Nutrition. Chronically elevated levels of insulin promote cancer in the human body. Guess what the saturated food is of a cancer cell? It isn't red meat. Nor is it fattened fat. The answer: glucose.

There is real evidence that a ketogenic diet is useful for cancer patients.

— Ash

13. April 8, 2010 9:19 am Link One additional point to consider: In 2007, the largest report ever conducted on the link between diet, physical activity, body weight and cancer risk concluded that the evidence linking intake of non-starchy vegetables and fruit to lower cancer risk was strong — but only for some cancers.

Specifically, the AICR/WCRF expert report, Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Cancer Risk found probable-evidence that consumption of 5 servings of lower risk for cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, stomach, esophagus and lung (fruits only). AICR estimates that consumption of f + v could prevent a relatively high percentage of cases — (For more on this, see the latest post on the AICR blog, http://www.aicrblog.org).

But the JNCI study looked at all cancers, including many that have never been linked to f + v intake — and still found a small protective effect. (In fact, those participants who were eating 6 or more f+v a day — the recommended amount for lowering cancer risk) had a 14% lower risk for all cancer than those who ate the least.

No, f and v intake isn't a panacea. And in fact, the major finding of the AICR/WCRF report was that obesity plays a central role in cancer, considerably larger than that of f + v intake.

But meals made up of mostly plant foods are less calorie-dense than meat-based meals, and help prevent the buildup of excess body fat has been convincingly linked to 6 different kinds of cancer.

Glen Weldon
Dir. of Education
American Institute for Cancer Research
http://www.aicr.org

— Glen Weldon

14. April 8, 2010 9:22 am Link It's still not a bad idea to eat a lot of vegetables, cancer or otherwise. Can't hurt.

— jk

15. April 8, 2010 9:25 am Link Many people eat foods that are more likely to actually increase the risk of cancer. So, even IF a vegetable rich diet doesn't have marked preventive or curative effects, at the very least, more carcinogens are not being added to the pot.

— L.

16. April 8, 2010 9:26 am Link All these studies don't show anything, as the real culprit for cancer is grain consumption, and possibly lack of Vitamin D. If you want to avoid the diseases of civilization you need to avoid all the foods of civilization. It is really that simple. The lifestyle that does this is called the paleo diet. It is explained here: http://paleodiet.com/definition.htm

— Don Wiss

17. April 8, 2010 9:27 am Link William Stannon (#6) has hit the nail on the head. I didn't ever expect that the consumption of fruits and vegetables in and of itself would reduce the chances of getting cancer. What consumption of fruits and vegetables may do is simply to substitute healthy food in the place of unhealthy food such as red meat, processed foods, and the like. By edging out the unhealthy food, it seems to me that one improves one's health substantially, irrespective of the disease-fighting impacts of eating healthy food.

— William Kandel

18. April 8, 2010 9:28 am Link Wait long enough and "studies" will show all that's bad for you is good for you — and vice versa. Life is short so just eat it (or drink it).

— Bill

19. April 8, 2010 9:30 am Link Perhaps the problem is that instead of looking at vegetables as interesting and delicious, we look at them as medicine.

We eat them because they are "good for us." We eat them because they will "make us healthy." We eat them because they will "help reduce the chances of getting [insert your favorite disease here]." And then when we (or worse, our kids) don't eat "enough," we feel guilty about it.

Try this. Eat vegetables because they taste good. Eat vegetables because you like them. Eat vegetables because eating them makes you feel good. Find as many ways as you can to enjoy them. Don't eat the vegetables you don't like, but try something new once in a while (I'm amazed at how much I like the taste of an anise bulb, either raw or roasted).

You'll be amazed at how many more you eat. And at how good you feel, even if they don't prevent cancer.

— JM

20. April 8, 2010 9:30 am Link The title should be "Eating Vegetables May Not Stop Cancer". This is one study. I hope it is because research doesn't discourage people from eating vegetables. We often forget about general wellness and quality of life, how we feel day-to-day.

FROM TPP — There's definitely more than one the notion that there is a general cancer benefit to increasing vegetable consumption. But as the story says, we should keep eating vegetables and lots of them for all sorts of other reasons.

— Christy

21. April 8, 2010 9:31 am Link As the widow of a man who died at a very young age of cancer, I can personally say that cancer is a very complicated disease. Many factors are involved with genetics playing an enormous role. The fact that my husband was the third member of his family to develop this cancer was obviously very significant. With a family history like that, no amount of fruits or vegetables could stop the inevitable. That said, diet can play an important role in overall health and should not be ignored. It may not stop cancer, but a well balanced diet can make you feel more energetic and help maintain a healthy weight.

FROM TPP — All very well stated. (and I am truly sorry for your loss.)

— jt in nj

22. April 8, 2010 9:40 am Link Maybe this will stop some of the self righteous posts from those who are sure they will never get cancer due to their healthy living. Cancer is complicated. You can't control every risk factor.#6

Jango, I doubt it. Self righteous and primitive will remain self righteous and primitive at least until ...

— anna

23. April 8, 2010 9:49 am Link The results of this study shouldn't surprise us, given the methods and the difficulties in standardizing food intake, but there's one aspect that makes me skeptical ...

More vegetables SHOULD result in at least modest weight loss, though the authors don't specifically address it, and we know that decreased BMI reduces the risk of several cancers (breast included).

Dietary changes that lead to weight loss will naturally lower cancer risk. Sometimes the results of a single study don't pass the smell test?

http://mamasoncall.com

— dr. mana

24. April 8, 2010 9:54 am Link I'm in the "eat fruits and veggie because they taste good" camp. If nothing else, if you eat six servings of fruits and veggies a day, you'll have had six servings of a wonderful variety of colors, textures and flavors. Works for me.

— Rebecca

25. April 8, 2010 9:54 am Link Funny how commenters who have not conducted any studies and haven't read this study are quick to condemn it. Obviously, it challenges their unproven beliefs, which is what science is supposed to do.

— Zeon

1 2 3 ... 7 Next >

Add your comments...

Your Name Required

Your e-mail Required, will not be published

Your Comment Comments are moderated and generally will be posted if they are on-topic and not abusive. For more information, please see our Comments FAQ.

Submit

Ads by Google | what's this?

Singapore Hawker in Tokyo
We are at Yamanote Line EBISU Chicken Rice, Bak Kut Teh, Laksa ...
sintongkee.jp

Previous post: Binge Eating During Sleep | Next post: Paperwork vs. Patients

Recent Posts

April 09 6 (5) More Protection for Radiation Patients
The Food and Drug administration promises new protections related to radiation equipment, and "The Radiation Boom" investigative reports that prompted the review.

April 09 4 (49) Not Your Mother's Broccoli
In the latest Recipes for Health, Martha Rose Shulman offers five new ways to prepare broccoli that are certain to win over even the most reluctant eaters.

April 09 4 (68) New Law Will Require Free Health Screenings
One of the best perks in the new health care legislation is a requirement for insurance companies to stop requiring co-payments for preventive care like physicals, mammograms and immunizations.

April 08 4 (6) Picture Your Life After Cancer
If you've experienced cancer, share your photos and stories explaining how your life has changed since your diagnosis.

April 08 4 (27) Paperwork vs. Patients
Young people who are learning to doctor spend as much time writing, typing or dictating about their patients as they do seeing them.



Comments of the Moment

"Recently, standing in line at Whole Foods I watched a couple of college students - both had just a single green-yellow (1) patty, some cooked/steamed/whiled? greens, some sprinkled nuts/grains and ... nothing else. I thought: "Who stole their adolescence?""

— anna
Eating Vegetables Doesn't Stop Cancer

"Now the sun is just the sun, my neighbors dog's butt is just his butt."

— Kairol Rosenthal
After Cancer, Everyday Miracles

"Ah, but the burning existential question that keeps me up at night is: Is the happiest person in the group, the one with a lot of cool friends to talk to, happier than the person who got a research grant to discover it?"

— Dorothy
Talk Deeply, Be Happy?

"Oh boy - another thing for the helicopter parent set to obsess over. Does it ever end?"

— Mizmoon
Baby Fat or Early Obesity?

"I have a cat who is FAT. My cat is very loved, as much for his size as his outgoing personality."

— Jennifer
The Stigma of Being 'Fat'

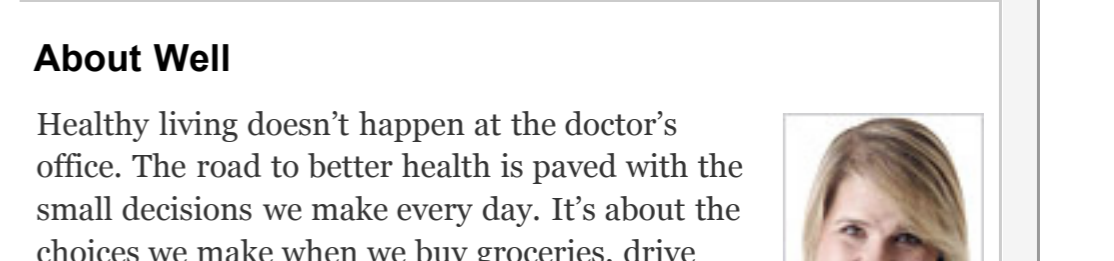
Health Care Conversations

Share your thoughts about the health care debate. Join the discussion.

- The Public Opinion
- A Single-Payer System
- Illegal Immigrants

PATIENT VOICES

The Voices of Migratee



Six men and women discuss living with migraines.

- The Voices of Rheumatoid Arthritis
- Coping With and Without Insurance
- The Voices of A.L.S.
- The Voices of O.C.D.

CONFRONTING CANCER

Dana Jennings

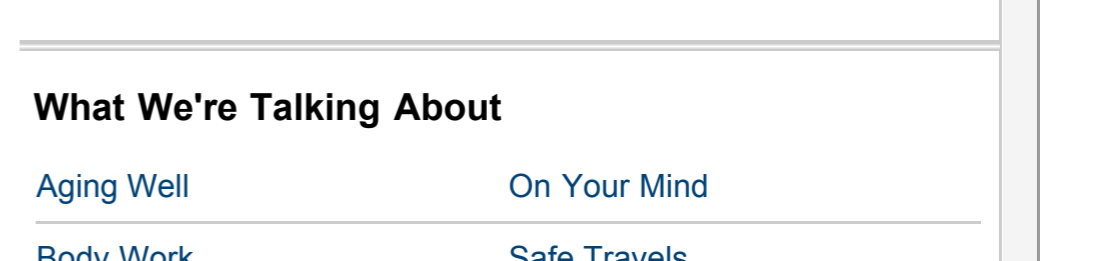


Dana Jennings blogs life after prostate cancer.

- A Dog, a Buzz Cut and Other Cancer Stories
- At Home in Solitude as a Spirit Recoverer
- A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Cancer Clinic

EAT WELL

Popcorn's Dark Secret

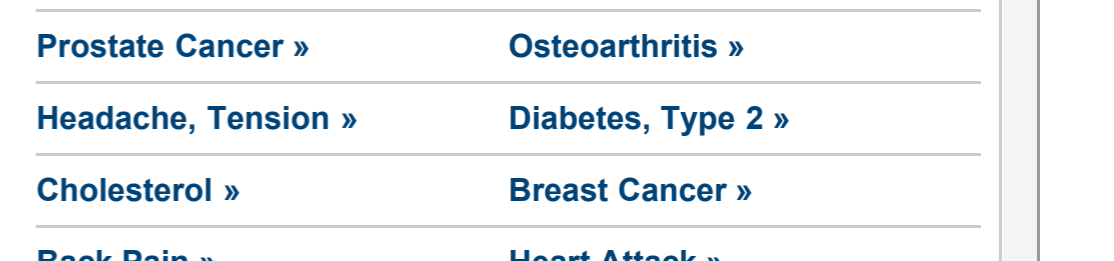


Movie-theater popcorn has an alarming amount of fat, salt and calories in even the smallest sizes.

- A Makeover for Food Labels
- Popcorn's Dark Secret
- Mark Bitman's Top 12 Make-Ahead Dishes

WELL PETS

Best Walking Partners



Having to walk a dog can help people be more consistent about regular exercise.

- The Cat Who Got Swine Flu
- The Value of Pet Therapy
- Pets Get MRSA Infections Too

SPECIAL SECTION

Decoding Your Health

A special issue of Science Times looks at the explosion of information about health and medicine and offers some guidelines on how to sort it all out

SPECIAL SECTION

Small Steps: A Good Health Guide

Trying to raise a healthy child can feel overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be.

SPECIAL SECTION

A Guided Tour of Your Body

Changes in our health are inevitable as we get older. What do we need to know about staying well as we age?

- Health Quiz
- Go to Special Section

About Well

Healthy living doesn't happen at the doctor's office. The road to better health is paved with the small decisions we make every day. It's about the choices we make when we buy groceries, drive our cars and hang out with our kids. Join columnist Tara Parker-Pope as she sifts through medical research and expert opinions for practical advice to help readers take control of their health and live well every day.



Archive

Select Month

Tag List

Table with 3 columns: Tag, Count, Count. Includes MARATHON (103), KIDS (53), CHEN (50), JENNINGS (50), EXERCISE (50), DOCTORS (49), NUTRITION (45), CANCER (45), WEIGHT (37), TEENS (36), PATIENT MONEY (35), RECIPES (35), PHYS ED (34), BREAST CANCER (34), PAULINE CHEN (32), PATIENT VOICES (32), PROSTATE CANCER (31), PREGNANCY (30), BRAIN (28), AGING (26), HOLIDAY FOOD (25), SLEEP (24), WOMEN (24), CHILDREN (23), THERESA BROWN (23), RECIPES FOR HEALTH (23), DEPRESSION (22), FOOD (22), DANA JENNINGS (22), ALCOHOL (21).

IN SCIENCE TIMES

When Lowering the Odds of Cancer Isn't Enough

If someone invented a pill to cut a cancer risk in half, would you take it?

- Film Body, No Workout Required?
- In Month of Giving, a Healthy Reward
- Food, Kin and Tension at Thanksgiving
- A Marathon Run in the Slow Lane
- All Past Columns

EATING WELL

Recipes for Health

The easiest and most pleasurable way to eat well is to cook. Recipes for Health offers recipes with an eye toward empowering you to cook healthy meals every day.

- Caley
- Sweet Potatoes
- Swiss Chard
- Peppers
- See All Recipes for Health

What We're Talking About

Aging Well | On Your Mind

Body Work | Safe Travels