Be a healthy weight to reduce your cancer risk

Does being overweight or obese increase my cancer risk?
Yes. Cancers are more common in people who are overweight or obese. Around two-thirds of people in Ireland are either overweight or obese. Obesity may be linked to 20% of all cancers. So, if you are overweight or obese, you are at a higher risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

Carrying a lot of fat around your middle (apple shape) can be particularly harmful. This is because having too much fat affects the balance of the hormone oestrogen in your body. High levels of oestrogen are linked with increased risk of breast and womb (endometrial) cancer. Obese people may have increased levels of hormones such as insulin, which might result in diabetes. Obese people can also have high growth factor levels, which can cause tumours to grow.

**Apple shape = higher risk of cancer**

**Pear shape = lower risk of cancer**
**What cancers are linked with obesity?**

Being obese puts you at risk of the following cancers:

- large bowel (colon and rectum),
- breast (post-menopause),
- endometrial (womb),
- gullet (oesophageal),
- pancreas,
- kidney,
- gall bladder.

**How can you reduce your risk of cancer?**

Eating a healthy, balanced diet may lower your risk of developing cancer. Being a healthy weight is one of the most important things you can do to help prevent cancer. Stories about various foods and diets linked to preventing cancer are often in the news. This is because a lot of research is going on into diet and cancer. But it isn't easy to study the link between diet and cancer as there are so many different factors involved. No single food or supplement can prevent cancer from developing.

**What is a healthy diet?**

A healthy diet is a diet that includes several different types of foods from each of the main food groups listed below. You need the right amount from each group so that your body gets all the nutrients it needs while maintaining a healthy weight. This means you should eat:

- plenty of bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods;
- plenty of fruit and vegetables;
- some milk, cheese and yogurt;
- some meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein;
- very small amounts of fats and oils; and
- a very small amount – or none at all – of foods and drinks that are high in fat, sugar and salt.
At least **five portions of different fruit and vegetables daily** will help prevent cancer.

In general, a balanced and varied diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables is recommended to provide all the vitamins, minerals and other nutrients your body needs.

**What counts as a portion?**

An adult portion is about 80g of fruit or vegetables, which is roughly the size of:

- an apple, orange, banana, or pear;
- a slice of melon or pineapple;
- a handful of grapes or berries;
- two satsumas, kiwi fruits, plums or a similar fruit;
- three heaped tablespoons of cooked vegetables, for example, carrots or broccoli;
- a dessert bowl of salad;
- three heaped tablespoons of beans or pulses. Pulses include lentils, chickpeas and kidney beans. You should only have one portion per day;
- a medium glass (150ml) of fresh fruit juice or a smoothie. You should only have one portion of this per day.

**Keep treats sensible**

Avoid eating too many foods like sugary drinks, fast foods, sweets and cakes. They promote weight gain and have little nutritional content.

**Eating red meat**

Eating red and processed meat can increase your risk of some cancers. Studies have shown that eating red meat can increase your risk of getting bowel cancer. Red meat includes beef, pork and lamb. Processed meats are meats that are preserved by smoking, curing, salting or adding preservatives. They include ham, bacon and sausages. It is recommended that you eat no more than 500g or 1lb of red meat per week. Avoid processed meats as much as possible. For more information, go to SafeFood at [www.safefood.eu](http://www.safefood.eu).
Limit the amount of salt in your diet

Reduce the amount of salt you eat to less than 6g per day (this is the same as one and a half teaspoons of salt). The best way to do this is to reduce the amount of processed foods you eat and to avoid adding extra salt to your meals. Salt and salt-preserved foods, such as processed meats, are probably a cause of stomach cancer.

Food labels can be confusing at the best of times and even more so when it comes to salt. This is because they usually list the amount of sodium, not salt.

To work out how much salt is in a food, multiply the sodium figure by 2.5.

For example; if a food has 1g of sodium per 100g, that means it has 2.5 grams of salt per 100g. Remember: **Salt = Sodium x 2.5.**

When you can, choose foods that are lower in salt or, choose foods that say 'no added salt'.

Limit the amount of alcohol you take

Men should try to have no more than two standard drinks a day, and women no more than one standard drink a day (one standard drink = half pint of beer, a small glass of wine or one pub measure of spirits). You should also aim to have some alcohol-free days. Evidence suggests that alcohol can increase the risk of many types of cancer.
Being a healthy weight

Being a healthy weight is one of the most important things you can do to help prevent cancer.

Maintaining a healthy weight:

- lowers your risk of cancer,
- helps to prevent conditions such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

It is important that you establish healthy eating habits and exercise regularly early in life to prevent becoming overweight or obese. If you are already overweight or obese, you should avoid further weight gain and try to lose weight. Even a 5% to 10% weight loss can improve your health.

One of the best ways to find out if you are a healthy weight is to measure around your waist. This is called your waist circumference. For the most accurate result, measure halfway between your lowest rib and the top of your hipbone, roughly in line with your belly button.

Try to keep your waistline measurement

- under 94 cm or 37 inches (if you are a man),
- under 80 cm or 32 inches (if you are a woman).

Another way to find out whether you are a healthy weight is by calculating your Body Mass Index (BMI):

- The BMI is based on your height and weight and gives you an idea of how healthy your weight is.
- A healthy BMI for people aged 18 to 64 is between 18.5 and 24.9.
- If your BMI is higher than 25, you are considered overweight.
- If your BMI is over 29.9, you are considered obese.
- For preventing cancer, aim to be at the lower end of the healthy range.
For men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If your BMI is:</th>
<th>You are:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 20</td>
<td>Underweight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Between 20 and 24.9</td>
<td>A healthy weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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If you want to check your BMI, you can use the BMI calculator at: http://weigh2live.safefood.eu/planandtrack/tools/bmi.asp. This calculator combines your BMI with your waist measurement to find out if you need to lose weight. You can also register on this website and get help to loss weight.

Useful websites:

- Safefood, promotes food safety and good nutrition: www.safefood.eu
- A BMI chart is available at: http://www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HPM00782.pdf
- More information on fruit and vegetable portion sizes at: http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/5ADAY/Documents/Downloads/5ADAY_portion_guide.pdf
- HSE Health Promotion: www.healthpromotion.ie
- Littlesteps, promotes healthy eating and increased physical activity in childhood: www.littlesteps.ie
- Get Ireland Active, promotes physical activity in Ireland: www.getirelandactive.ie
- Irish Cancer Society: www.cancer.ie
- Health Well is a health information website: http://obesity.thehealthwell.info/
- World Health Organisation global strategy on diet and health: www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/en/