

Colorectal Cancer Awareness: How Much Do We Really Know About Diet and Risk?

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Colorectal (or bowel) cancer (CRC) is more common than most people realise and deadlier than it needs to be. Around 45% of CRC cases are estimated to be preventable. And yet, it remains the second most common cancer in Malta and one of the leading causes of cancer-related deaths worldwide. So, what's going wrong?

Blaming it partly on lifestyle choices and a lack of public awareness, there is a mountain of strong evidence linking CRC to diet, nutrition, and physical activity. The World Cancer Research Fund sums up the causes as follows: while consuming processed meat causes bowel cancer, basing your diet on red meat, consuming alcohol, and carrying excess weight also raises your risk. Conversely, being physically active, eating whole grains and fibre-rich food, and ensuring calcium sources in your diet can help protect you. Despite all this, many people have no idea these factors play a role.

A local cross-sectional study led by Thea Schembri and supervised by Dr Petra Jones drove this point home. The researchers surveyed 150 Maltese adults to measure their awareness of CRC risk factors and the role of diet in its prevention. While most participants recognised that diet plays a role in CRC development, fewer than half were aware that CRC could be prevented at all. About a third of participants identified an unhealthy diet as a risk factor, and slightly more suggested a healthy diet could reduce their risk of bowel cancer. However, few participants mentioned steps like increasing fibre, reducing alcohol intake, or maintaining a healthy weight as key actions in reducing risk. In fact, most failed to mention the consumption of processed meat as a risk or even recognise bacon as a typical example when given a list. Younger participants, in particular, were less aware, signalling a need for targeted education.

Processed meat, for example, ham, salami, and some sausages, refers to any meat that has been altered to enhance its flavour, shelf life, or quality through curing, smoking, salting, or adding preservatives. Eating processed meat regularly can significantly increase the risk of colorectal cancer (by 18%) and colon cancer (by 23%) for every 50g consumed daily – that's roughly the size of a sausage or a couple of slices of bacon.

Public health campaigns have successfully promoted seat belt use, sunscreen, and smoking awareness – CRC prevention deserves the same focus. Teaching children at a young age about the benefits of whole grains, the perils of processed meats, and the importance of eating vegetables can make a lasting impact. Preventing CRC isn't rocket science, but it does require proactive steps like education, awareness, and simple lifestyle changes. Let's use food as our medicine and take meaningful action. 



Thea Schembri
Photo by Kristov Scicluna



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Photo by James Moffett

Further Reading

Schembri, T., & Jones, P. (2023). Assessing Awareness on the Role of Diet in Colorectal Cancer Prevention: A Pilot Study. *Proceedings of the 14th European Nutrition Conference FENS 2023, Serbia*, 91(1), 149. <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2023091149>