

Cancer scares - just what is good for us?

VIEWPOINT

Richard Evans

Head of Communications for World Cancer Research Fund

Hardly a week seems to pass without something or other being hailed as the miracle cure or another cause of cancer.

In this week's Scrubbing Up, the World Cancer Research Fund's head of communications, Richard Evans, questions what damage media scare stories are doing to the credibility of science.

If you have ever seen a newspaper headline about something that either increases or reduces cancer risk and thought the advice on preventing cancer seems to change like the wind then you are not alone.

We commissioned a YouGov survey that showed about half (52%) of people think scientists are "always changing their minds" about cancer - perhaps not surprising, given the sheer volume of news coverage devoted to a mind-boggling number of things that apparently affect our cancer risk.

Far from helping people make informed choices, the large amounts of coverage can have the opposite effect.

So many foods are mentioned that people rightly question whether all of these articles can actually be right, not to mention the fact that following all the advice would virtually be a full-time job.

For instance, people shouldn't take notice of deodorants being linked to breast cancer, liquorice being linked to reduced risk of bowel cancer and Facebook causing cancer.

Front page news?

These are all things that have been reported in the media but that people shouldn't worry about. It may be (and I don't know one way or the other) that the research behind these is valid, but the stories about them are certainly unhelpful.

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The problem is largely about how findings are communicated.

If something is on the front page, it must be a pretty big deal, mustn't it?

Well, no. Breakthroughs do not happen that often.

Rather than being full of Eureka moments, our understanding of cancer risk is more like a police investigation where each new study is a single piece of evidence.

It is only by putting all this evidence together - which sometimes takes years - that scientists can be confident enough to give advice. **Grim reading**

Public confusion has a real effect, with our survey showing 27% say, because health advice seems to keep changing, the best approach is to ignore it all and eat what you want.

So millions of people who might be prepared to change their lifestyle do not do so because they don't have enough trust in the advice they are getting.

This is despite a whole body of top-quality evidence, not just an individual study, showing eating a plant-based diet, being regularly physically active and maintaining a healthy weight can reduce cancer risk.

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The survey also makes grim reading for the media. Almost half (46%) of people said they do not trust news coverage about the things that affect cancer risk.

The solution is simple. Scientists need to get better at explaining their research simply and journalists need to get better at including information about the limitations of the studies, even if it makes their articles less interesting. But just because the media reporting of cancer risk can be confusing, it doesn't mean people can't get good advice on how they can reduce their cancer risk. It just means the front page of a national newspaper might not be the best place to get it.

Provocative thoughts from experts in the worlds of health and medicine

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