I have heard that what you eat and drink can lead to cancers such as bowel cancer, is that true?

Siobhan says… many components of the food we eat have the potential to cause cancer.

Bowel cancer is the second most common cancer in New Zealand and research shows that around 75 per cent of bowel cancers can be prevented or reduced through early detection, changes in diet and regular exercise.

It has been known for a long time that many components of the food we eat have the potential to cause cancer. The human body has many defence mechanisms to protect it from harmful agents both consumed in our diet and absorbed from our environment. These defence mechanisms rely on a healthy immune system, dietary antioxidants and a strong, healthy digestive system. However, dietary components such as alcohol and high fat foods may encourage the replication of cancer cells.

The dietary factors most likely to increase the risk of some cancers are:

- Being obese - a diet high in fat may increase the risk of colon cancer.
- High intake of red meat and meat products - there is some evidence that the risk of colon cancer is greatest in people with the highest intake of red and processed meat, possibly as a result of exposure to carcinogens (cancer causing chemicals) created during cooking e.g. burnt or charred, and over cooked meats.
- Lack of fruit and vegetables - a low intake of fruit and vegetables is strongly associated with the development of many cancers, particularly colorectal cancer. The protective effect of fruit and vegetables is thought to be due to the wide range of antioxidants, vitamins and fibres they contain. No particular fruit or vegetable is more beneficial than another and it is likely that a wide range of fruits and vegetables offers most protection. Aim for at least two portions of fruit and three portions of vegetables a day. A portion is approximately 80g or can be measured as a handful. For more information visit www.5aday.co.uk , www.5aday.nhs.uk/topTips/default.html and www.vegetables.co.nz
- Lack of dietary fibre - having a high fibre diet appears to reduce the risk of colon cancer. Fibre increases the rate at which food moves through the bowel and reduces the time in which the intestines are in contact with potentially harmful substances. Bacteria in the bowel ferment some of the fibres to produce substances called short chain fatty acids which have beneficial effects for the bowel. Try to include wholegrain breads, cereals, oats, pasta, any type of beans, lentils, chick peas, fruit and vegetables on a regular basis.

More information on bowel cancer can be found at: www.crct.org.nz

Here is some general advice from the World Cancer Research Fund:

1. Be as lean as possible without becoming underweight.
2. Be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day.
3. Limit your consumption of energy dense foods (foods high in fat and/ or sugars and/ or low in fibre) and avoid sugary drinks. Remember, energy-dense foods are high in fats and sugars and can be low in nutrients. These foods, especially when eaten frequently or in large portions, increase the risk of obesity, which increases the risk of cancer. Fast foods like burgers, chips, fried chicken and most pizzas, and snack foods like chocolate, crisps and biscuits tend to be energy dense.

4. Eat more of a variety of vegetables, fruits, wholegrains, and pulses such as beans.
5. Limit consumption of red meats (such as beef, pork and lamb). Aim to limit intake of red meat to less than 500g cooked weight (about 700-750g raw weight) a week. Try to avoid processed meats such as bacon, ham, salami, corned beef and some sausages.
6. If consumed at all, limit alcohol.