Eating Vegetables Doesn't Stop Cancer

A number of studies show that high vegetable consumption is associated with lower cancer risk. Sometimes the results of a single study are so unexpected that researchers are at a loss to explain them. But the JNCI study looked at all cancers, including many that are not related to diet.

Although vegetables contain a variety of antioxidants, some of which are shown to decrease the risk of cancer, eating veggies will help lead to healthy living. Cancer is complicated. You can't control every risk factor.

"Maybe this will stop some of the self-righteous posts from those who are sure they will never get cancer due to their vegetables or pepperidge farms turkey dinner," said Dr. geleceği Gardner of Stanford.

"I think it shows we have to acknowledge that with current knowledge, we can't say clearly what will help reduce the chances of getting cancer." Dr. Gardner said. "So right now, it just makes sense to eat your vegetables because they help you to be good for you – and vice versa.

There is nothing inherently unhealthy about a meat-based meal. If you choose your ingredients carefully, you can make a meat-based meal at least as healthy as a veggie-based meal.

But the JNCI study looked at all cancers, including many that are not related to diet. The effect of vegetable consumption on cancer risk is not statistically significant. In addition, a 4 percent reduction in relative risk offers very little practical importance. It implies that vegetable eaters also are less likely to smoke or drink to excess. In addition, the results don't mean you should push those greens off your plate.

"It's a statement about the importance of healthy eating in general," said Dr. Gardner.

"Maybe it's a small step toward making people think about heart disease, smoking, alcohol use and certain types of cancers. But it's not a statement that says, 'OK, let's eat more vegetables.'"

Scientists have known for decades that vegetables are healthful. They are high in vitamins, minerals and fiber. They are not high in saturated fat. They are low in calories compared with other high-calorie foods. Eating vegetables also increases the intake of fiber, which is associated with a lower risk of heart disease. In addition, vegetables such as broccoli and sweet potatoes are good sources of disease-fighting antioxidants, which protect the body from damaging substances. There is also evidence that consuming vegetables may help prevent diabetes and certain types of cancer.

"If someone invented a pill to cut a cancer risk inordinately, like by 4 percent, we wouldn't have a pill because we don't have the technology to do that," Dr. Gardner said. "But if I am going to keep you healthy, I am going to say eat your vegetables because it's just a part of how we keep you healthy."

"You can't control everything and you can't say that vegetables prevent cancer. But you eat them because they're good for you – and vice versa." The lesson of the JNCI study is that vegetables can be a small part of a healthy lifestyle, which includes avoiding unhealthy food such as red meat, processed foods, and the high-fat dairy products of the past.