

Eating our way to cancer

Cancer cases in the under-50s are on the rise. Is the food we eat to blame?

Alarming statistics show that early onset cancer cases have increased by a staggering 79 per cent in the last 30 years. In the UK, there has been a 22 per cent increase in cases in adults aged under 50. As the documentary shows, there are many contributing factors. But what role does the food we eat play when it comes to increasing cancer rates?

Diagnosed with stage three bowel cancer, Dr Anisha Patel recalls waking up at night during panic attacks "not being able to breathe". Dr Patel, who says "the gut microbiome is really important in terms of cancer", is working with researchers to understand more about the possible reasons behind this huge increase.

Dr Judy King, a breast oncologist from the Royal Free Hospital, explains that she has seen a marked increase in the number of young people with breast cancer, especially women. Dr King says that there is greater recognition of what she calls "modifiable risk factors" – that is, the factors that involve a change in lifestyle, especially diet.

"We know that obesity is one of the single most important things that is affecting the increase in cancer rates. I think it's something like one in 20 cancers that are related to obesity now." But it is not just obesity that increases your risk. Recent studies have shown that the type of food we eat is crucial. A recent study from EPIC (The European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition) funded by the World Cancer Research Fund found a direct correlation between ultra processed food and cancer rates.

The multi-national European prospective cohort study found that as you substitute 10 per cent ultra processed food in your diet with minimally processed food, you reduce your overall risk of getting cancer by 4 per cent. Specifically, this dietary change reduces certain forms of cancer significantly – head and neck cancer by 20 per cent, liver cancer by 27 per cent, colon cancer by 12 per cent, and rectal cancer by 10 per cent. As seen in the video, Rob Hobson, a nutritionist and author, explains that possible reasons for this may lie in the gut. Hobson says: "Ultra processed food can cause an overgrowth of bad bacteria, so high amounts of sugar, saturated fat, and possibly even certain additives like emulsifiers can impact the diversity of bacteria. These are particles that you don't want entering your gut, so undigested food toxins and even bacteria can cause inflammation, which underpins a lot of chronic diseases."

He explains that if you are looking to "unprocess your life", it's important to focus on how to get more of the good foods into your diet. Dr Patel is largely focusing on "variety is the key" when it comes to her family's health. Examining the contents of her fridge, she explains that she tries to get 30 healthy things in a day into the family diet to regulate the microbiome. Panagiota Mitrou, director of research for the World Health Organisation, says "there is a huge responsibility by the government to ensure that individuals and communities have the support and encouragement by having accessible and affordable products that are minimally processed".