

What you do not eat can influence cancer

The importance of whole grains in cancer prevention measures

European Whole Grain Advocacy EWGA



The Association of European Cancer Leagues endorsed this statement (May 2020)



What is whole grain: whole grains are grains and grain products made from the entire grain seed, which consists of the bran, germ and endosperm. Whole grains contain starch and protein as well as variable amounts of fibre, B vitamins and other micronutrients that are most concentrated in the germ and outer layers of the grain.



What does the research tell us?

There is strong evidence that people can reduce their risk of cancer by adopting healthy dietary and activity behaviours. Certain lifestyle factors affect the risk of developing colorectal cancer, as highlighted by the World Cancer Research Fund/American Institute [Third Expert Report](#) Diet, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Cancer: a Global Perspective.

Observational studies¹ show that dietary fibre and particularly fibre found in cereals, is associated with lower risk of colorectal cancer. In fact, one of the four [Cancer Prevention Recommendations](#) (World Cancer Research Fund - WCRF) is to make whole grains a major part of the daily diet. A [WCRF analysis](#) on the dose-response relationship between wholegrain consumption and the risk of colorectal cancer indicated a 17% decreased risk per 90g intake of wholegrains consumed per day.

Whole grains do not have a protective effect on colorectal cancer risk exclusively. Whole grain consumption more than 7 times per week has been also associated with reduced risk of breast cancer².

Moreover, healthy eating is essential in developing effective interventions to improve health of cancer survivors. Childhood cancer survivors [report](#) several barriers to exercise and consumption of a low-fat diet with more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and calcium-rich foods.

Many of the protective compounds found in wholegrains (e.g. phenolic, antioxidants, fibre, resistant starch) are also in fruits and vegetables, but some compounds are more concentrated in wholegrains, such as ferulic and caffeic acid³. According to this study, the

¹ Aune, D., et al., Dietary fibre, whole grains, and risk of colorectal cancer: systematic review and dose-response meta-analysis of prospective studies. *BMJ*, 2011.

² Whole Grain Consumption and Breast Cancer: A Case-Control Study in Women, 2014, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07315724.2014.963899>.

³ Whole-grain consumption and chronic disease: Protective mechanisms, 1996, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01635589709514495?src=recsys&>.

range of protective effects of wholegrains include binding of carcinogens and modulation of glycaemic index.

The last edition of the [European Code Against Cancer](#) (ECAC) clearly recommends the public to “take action to be a healthy body weight” and to “have a [healthy diet](#)”, which includes “eating plenty of wholegrains, pulses, fruits & vegetables”, to reduce cancer risk.

Our calls to actions – in response to the Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan public consultation

[Between 30-50% of all cancer cases are preventable](#) (World Health Organization). Reducing exposure to cancer risk factors and ensuring that people access the necessary information to adopt healthy lifestyles are fundamental to shift towards healthy and sustainable diets.

Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan is a key opportunity to put prevention high on the agenda of national policies and European programmes. The European Commission Communication on the Cancer Plan acknowledges that, although up to 40% of cancers might be preventable, [only an average of 3% of health budgets](#) is spent on prevention across the EU.

In the light of the above, the European Whole Grain Advocacy (EWGA) campaign welcomes the European Commission Roadmap for the Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan and the related position paper by the Association of European Cancer Leagues (ECL). EWGA supports the [ECL paper analysis and recommendations](#) related to the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Specifically, we recognise that nudging people to adopt healthier behaviours in their daily lives is not sufficient per se, as people’s behaviour is also influenced by other social, economic and commercial determinants.

Consequently, actions aiming at improving diet and nutrition must include broader measures addressing people’s needs and determinants of health.

EWGA calls on the European Commission to:

 Help consumers to make informed choices about food products by implementing standard front-of-pack food labelling schemes and provide consistent information on the nutritional value of food, comprising criteria for clear minimum levels for a product to qualify as a whole grain food, in the context of sustainable food production and consumption.

 Include whole grains in the implementation of EU-wide nutrient profiles for nutrition and health claims following [WHO recommendations](#).

 Work with Member States to:

- encourage EU-wide clear dietary reference values for whole grain and the update of their Food-Based Dietary Guidelines by including whole grains and suggesting precise quantitative intakes of whole grains to communicate clearer optimal quantitative whole grain intakes associated with health benefits;
- apply pricing policies to influence access and affordability of whole grain food.

*The **EU whole grain advocacy campaign** is on a mission to encourage more Europeans to switch to whole grains. In fact, despite the numerous health benefits of whole grain (WG), WG consumption in Europe remains very concerningly low. The EU whole grain advocacy campaign has been constructed around four key policy asks, comprising a **harmonized WG definition, quantitative WG recommendations, EU standards for whole grain labelling** and **revision of the EFSA’s 2010 Scientific Opinion**, which concluded that whole grain was not sufficiently characterized and, thus, health claims related to whole grains were not substantiated.*