

It Does Matter What You Eat

By Chef Laura Pole, RN, MSN

For 30 years as an oncology nurse, I continue to hear of cancer care specialists who tell patients that it doesn't matter what they eat, just get enough protein and calories to prevent weight loss.

In my work as a health supportive chef and educator, I have seen first-hand that it does matter what you eat in sickness and in health.

Debbie, for example, learned she had very aggressive breast cancer. Her doctor said she had only a small chance of living beyond 6 months. She asked for the most powerful medical treatments they could give her—and she asked to see a dietician. The oncology dietician asked “What did your oncologist say your prognosis is?” When Debbie answered, “Probably less than 6 months”, the dietician dished up a plate of unappetizing advice: “Oh, then, eat whatever you like—candy bars, potato chips. . . it doesn't matter . . . “

This advice incensed Debbie. She took her flash fire of anger and transformed it into a determination to heal. Her grandmother moved in with her and fed her greens and liver almost every day (probably seasoned with deep love).

Debbie says she withstood high doses of chemotherapy without serious drops in her blood counts. I met her 5 years after her diagnosis when told me she had no signs of cancer and all the signs of vitality and passion for life.

Then, there was Judy. Judy had very advanced ovarian cancer and had had most of her stomach removed. She could only eat a few bites of food at a time. She received most of her nourishment from an IV infusion at night.

Judy came to Smith Canter's Cancer Help Program and I asked her how I could serve her. She told me that eating gourmet food used to be one of her greatest pleasures. We came up with the plan that I'd prepare the most delicious food possible, with a few bites beautifully plated. She would come in to dine with everyone during the last half of the meal.

Judy received the ultimate of what food can give you—the sense of caring and connectedness that is the root of healing.

I now know that people with all stages of cancer can have good appetites and can eat heartily. After a week of eating whole foods, my clients often tell me they feel “pleasantly cleansed”. Indeed, their complexions are clearer, their eyes are brighter and their countenances radiant.

A pleasant experience of eating nourishing and nurturing foods helps people feel connected to each other and to a larger whole. And eating whole foods sends a very basic message to the body/mind/spirit: The whole of life is inherent in nourishing food—and real food is the ultimate transformation of energy into life.

When you eat whole food that is lovingly and thoughtfully prepared, you are eating more than protein, carbohydrates, fats and phytonutrients—you are eating life.

Yes, it does matter what you eat!