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Five a day 'has little effect on preventing cancer'

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EATING fruit and vegetables has only a "modest" effect on cutting the risk of developing cancer, research suggests.

Several studies have found that eating healthily can reduce the chance of cancer and other diseases, but new research on almost 500,000 people has found five portions of fruit and vegetables a day had little effect.

But the researchers and other e

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xperts pointed out that while the impact was small, it was still potentially large enough to protect many people against cancer.

The new study analysed data in ten European countries that were part of the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC). Researchers looked at cancer risk between 1992 and 2000.

Daily consumption of fruit, vegetables and fruit and vegetables combined was analysed and compared with information on the number of cancer cases.

The researchers also considered other factors likely to influence cancer risk such as smoking, alcohol intake, obesity, meat and processed meat intake, and exercise.

The participants were sorted into five groups, from those with the lowest intake of fruit and vegetables (0 to 226g a day) to those with the highest (more than 647g a day). The results showed that eating an extra 200g of fruit and vegetables a day reduced the risk of cancer by 3 per cent.

Eating an extra 100g of vegetables a day decreased the risk by about 2 per cent while an extra 100g of fruit a day reduced the risk by about 1 per cent.

The link between eating a large amount of vegetables and reduced cancer risk only applied to women, the study found.

Heavy drinkers had a reduced risk from eating a lot of fruit and vegetables, but this reduction only applied to cancers caused by alcohol or smoking.

Further analysis showed that if everyone in the sample ate an extra 150g a day of fruit and vegetables, 2.6 per cent of cancers in men and 2.3 per cent of cancers in women could be avoided.

The researchers, led by Paolo Boffetta at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, said their study "supports the notion of a modest cancer preventive effect of high intake of fruits and vegetables". But they said that the link between intake and reduced cancer risk was "very weak" and other factors could be causing the lower risk.

A 1997 report from the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) found there was "convincing evidence" of a protective effect against respiratory and digestive cancers from eating large amounts of fruit and vegetables.