



You Are What You Eat: Healing and Health Following Cancer

by Carolyn S. Ellis

"Let good food be thy medicine." Hippocrates

You are what you eat, my mother liked to say.

In her book, baloney wasn't food. Nor was peanut butter and jelly. She sent me to school with chicken sandwiches and tuna salad, always with lettuce. Her mom canned vegetables from the garden.

My dad's parents grew most of what they ate, including peaches and eggs in their backyard in Springfield, Massachusetts. When I was 17, my mom died and I took over the kitchen, learning to cook simple meals for my dad and myself.

Coming from a background of homemade and home-grown food, I considered myself a healthy eater. But in January 1994 I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer Stage III.

Following surgery and chemotherapy, I was told I was cancer-free. Good news! However, I had heard some discouraging survival odds, so I decided while things were good I should begin an all-out effort to get well and stay well.

As readers may recall, I began my story in CapeWomenOnline with Heidi, the sprite brought to life in 1880 by Swiss author Johanna Spyri.

It took me 40 years and a cancer diagnosis to recognize Heidi as a healer. By bringing her invalid friend from the city to Alm Uncle's mountain cabin, Heidi gave Clara fresh air and sunlight, goat's milk, and a break from her toxic home environment. When Peter the shepherd flung Clara's wheelchair down the mountain, Clara had another good reason to walk.

Shortly after diagnosis I had a mountaintop experience in the public library where I found shelves of books by cancer survivors who had found ways outside conventional medicine to get well and stay well.

Food was a common theme. That the authors had success with different diets, even conflicting ones, didn't trouble me. I rejoiced that there were many ways to get well, and I still believe that is true.

The day I met Howard was another mountaintop experience. An acquaintance on the Cape told me her father had cured himself of prostate cancer with vitamins and massage. I was incredulous. Months later Howard agreed to meet me in Falmouth and share his story.

When diagnosed with prostate cancer ten years earlier, Howard sought the advice of a friend, a medical doctor, who many years before had been diagnosed with testicular cancer.

That young man, newlywed and a medical student, wanted to have children so he refused conventional treatment that would have destroyed his fertility. Instead he used massage and meditation to get well.

As a result of their time together, Howard decided to use mega-doses of vitamins and Swedish massage to dispel the cancer. He quit his workaholic ways and took a hard look at his marriage.

He found an oncologist who, though doubtful, agreed to monitor him regularly so he knew his alternative program was working. When we met ten years later, Howard was happy and healthy. I keep a photo of us on the beach in Falmouth as a daily reminder that Howard was present for me.

Like Howard, I also wanted to change the biochemical milieu that had allowed cancer to get a grip on me. I read everything I could find about dietary customs and nutritional health.

Some caveats seemed logical: reduce your consumption of sugar, artificial sweeteners, alcohol, caffeine, and processed foods. Some were intriguing: avoid pork, plants of the nightshade family, or carbonated beverages. Eat lots of soy and cruciferous vegetables. Some were challenging: eliminate dairy products or gluten.

After adopting many of these practices I wasn't looking very well. A friend insisted I see her doctor, a practitioner of orthomolecular medicine.

From him I learned that each person is biochemically unique with different food allergies or sensitivities

and different needs for vitamins and minerals. On a customized program I began to feel well and look good again.

Why are vitamins and minerals necessary? Food today is deficient in nutrients. Our soil is tired and our environment polluted. Food is harvested far from where it is consumed and ages while in transit. Add to that the use of genetically modified seeds, chemical fertilizers, and industrial processing of much of what we consume to round out the picture.

Linus Pauling, PhD, molecular biologist and two-time winner of the Nobel Prize, introduced the term orthomolecular medicine in 1968. You can learn more about this complementary approach, also known as functional or nutritional medicine, at www.orthomed.org and from the Linus Pauling Institute at <http://lpi.oregonstate.edu>.

Stephan Brown of Great Cape Herbs has been growing and selling herbal preparations for 20 years in Brewster on Route 6A. His offerings include tinctures, salves, and teas. Stephan has an organic approach to gardening and to life. He says, "I sow seeds widely and see where they sprout. That's where I plant the rest."

Stephan believes in self-care. He knows there's a place for allopathic medicine, but that's just one part of our journey to wellness. "Don't give away your power to help heal yourself," he tells clients. "Resources are awaiting your discovery. Read. Go to classes. Ask questions. Be a pioneer. Help one another. Eat well." You can learn more about herbalism and Stephan's practice at www.greatcape.com.

Being on a special diet means taking care of yourself whenever you shop, prepare a meal, pack a snack, or sit down to eat.

If you have a health condition that allopathic medicine hasn't been able to cure, consider an elimination diet. For 30 days you will eat a limited variety of foods, steering clear of common irritants like eggs, dairy, soy, corn, wheat, and sugar.

Monitor how you feel and look. Has your rosacea or eczema cleared up? Are you less stiff and achy? Is your digestion better and is your belly more comfortable?

When your body is given a respite from foods to which it is allergic or sensitive, symptoms you may have thought couldn't be related get better. Then when you add foods back, one at a time over a period of days, your body can react to those it doesn't tolerate well.

A 28-day detox and elimination diet is available from Whole Life Nutrition at www.wholelifenuitrition.net. There are also recipes for special diets including gluten-free.

I have continued to take a personalized program of supplements for more than 15 years. Three years ago I eliminated gluten from my diet. It was inconvenient at first, but I'm used to the accommodations I have to make, and the world has caught up, with grocery stores and many restaurants offering G-F options.

Weight loss and infrequent appearance of rosacea are the visible results, and I trust there are unseen changes, too, contributing to a stronger immune system.

Allopathic doctors want to manage illness, like having cancer be a chronic disease. That's better than dying, but isn't it best to be free of disease and pharmaceutical medications?

Stephen Brown is right to admonish us to work toward good health. Dietary changes, supplements, visualization, exercise, massage, and meditation are elements we can use. Don't be deterred by naysayers among your family and friends or pessimism from your medical team.

These articles are my way of being present for you, and I hope my experiences in getting well and staying well over the past 17 years will resonate. I wish you good health and happiness. Thank you for sharing the journey.



Carolyn Ellis has been well since initial treatment for ovarian cancer in 1994; she is grateful and pleasantly surprised to be one of the 2 in 10 who make it to five years.

She writes to increase awareness of ovarian cancer because early detection is important.

Carolyn wants to help women dealing with ovarian cancer focus on positive possibilities because hope is critical to recovery. She can be reached at staywell.ce@gmail.com or www.2in10.net

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