

Interpreting nutrition information for patients and clinicians: Making sense of the madness

2014 Oncology Nutrition Symposium, Visit the Expert Session
by Suzanne Dixon, MPH, MS, RD

Address oncology nutrition gray areas with the four “Cs”

Confidence

You do not need to have the answer immediately, but you can respond confidently. “Yes, I also heard about that study that everyone is interpreting to mean we should eat more butter. I suspect there’s more to the story than what we’re hearing in the popular press. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

Context

If any one study or research paper does not seem to fit with the overall pattern of findings on a topic, it should be viewed with caution.

For meta-analyses, which seem to be in the news constantly, consider which studies were included in the analysis, and how these were selected. Also, many, many assumptions are made when data are combined; interpret these reports with care.

Consider the “big picture” of how a particular food or type of diet is followed around the world. Consider disease rates in places where people eat that food. Consider what else is different about these populations. Use common sense.

Be wary of single nutrient studies in cells and animals. Much has been made of these studies, but their results cannot be applied directly to humans.

Competence

Begin to learn the big “landmark” studies in the cancer nutrition field. Examples: beta-carotene and cancer survivorship; soy and breast cancer

Use available tools:

Natural Comprehensive Medicines Database – access through ON DPG website

NIH ODS – <http://ods.od.nih.gov/>

IBIDS database – http://ods.od.nih.gov/Health_Information/IBIDS.aspx

Social Media – Follow and read “the experts”

Commitment

Set a schedule and stick to it. Pull one new paper per week or per month. Read it. Study it. Understand it. Be able to explain it. Look at your patient populations and study what makes the most sense for you. Do you see mostly head and neck cancer patients? Start with that. SHARE your knowledge and others will share theirs with you.