

A Diet That Worked For Me

OK, the cats out of the bag. I drink a tea made from Slippery Elm Bark, Burdock Root, Sheep Sorrel and Blessed Thistle. It tastes like dirt. I eat a handful of pumpkin seeds, take multi supplements and drink a glass of wine each day. Oops don't tell my doctor about the last one.

Why do I do this?

I do it because it could cure my cancer; and because it meant the difference between being able to stay on a clinical trial or not.

I bet my doctor is groaning as she reads this. "She thinks tea and wine are going to cure her, she's a fruit loop! And I thought she was so sensible." Well, truth is, I don't know of anyone, if told that eating something might keep their cancer away, wouldn't at least try it. Diet may not be able to prevent cancer, or even cure it, but once you have cancer, it can make the world of difference to your life.

Before cancer, I never really thought about my diet in relation to my health. OK, sure, I knew I should eat my fruit and veggies, but I never really ate for a reason and I'd never actually been on a diet.

Oh no, I can feel the hate coming through the page, agggghh! I'm sorry! I'm just one of those annoying people who have fast metabolisms and don't put on weight.

But did you know that broccoli has a special chemical in it that could help prevent ovarian cancer. Or that while all my college mates were guzzling beer, the glass of wine I was sipping could have been protecting me.

I started my clinical trial in February 2008. As all us chemo clubbers know, chemo sucks the life out of your immune system – ANC's to us or Absolute Neutrophil Count to you. They're special white blood cells, and are especially important in fighting infection. That's why we clubbers live by our ANC number, because, if it's less than 1, chemo is a no-go.

Most doctors prescribe ANC booster shots, to keep the level up, and maintain your chemo schedule – one of the most important things in cancer treatment. The ANC boosters make you feel horrible, but obviously they're worth it.

However, my clinical trial didn't allow the magic shots. During previous chemo, I'd needed them because my ANC's did dip low, so I knew I was in trouble. This trial could be the difference between seeing my children grow up or not; the promise of a new drug that could keep my cancer in remission.

I needed to take back some control over my body!

So I asked myself, what can I do? Well, I don't have a magic wand but I had heard people talking about diet and how it could help. Turns out in my case, and for many others, it can.

I can only tell you what worked for me, but do the googling and I'm sure you'll find something out there that will help. This was my daily regimen: Pro-Complex protein drink, an immunity yoghurt, a handful of pumpkin seeds, lots of dark meat like Italian ham or dark turkey, Zinc supplement, and half to a full bar of 80% cocoa chocolate – there has to be some fun!

And it worked. Two weeks after chemo my ANC would drop to somewhere between 0.1 and 0.5, which was dangerously low. How the heck was I going to climb back from there? But with the diet, one week later (the day of my chemo) it would climb back to 1.5 – my magic CHEMO GO number. The more I stuck to the diet, the more it would bounce back. More than once it got as high as 5!

I couldn't believe how much my diet could affect my immune system. And not only that, eating oily fish twice a week, and a teaspoon of cod liver oil each day (I know, yuk!), could take my platelets from 40,000 to 100,000, again another CHEMO GO number. Platelets are needed for blood clotting, so if they are dangerously low obviously its CHEMO NO-GO.

Another tip: If you're having problems with neuropathy (numbness in your fingers and toes) try L-Glutamine, 10mg a day. It was in the Pro-Complex drink I took, and in three weeks my neuropathy was gone. You can also buy it separately, but make sure it's the powdered kind.

And one more tip for the road. Your ANC's usually peak in the middle of the afternoon and increase just after exercise. So I know its silly, but I did all my blood tests around 2pm after having been on the treadmill for 10 minutes. My nurse laughs at me, but hey, if it works, don't knock it.

My diet pulled me through, every cycle. And I know for sure, I wouldn't have completed the trial without it.

And now I'm out of regular chemo?

I still eat and drink all those things and more. The tea, called Essiac tea, is an ancient Ojibway Indian herbal remedy. I really hate it, but it helps balance my digestive system, and, I believe, keeps my tumor marker in check.

So whether you're having problems with ANC's, platelets, or red blood cells, diet can make a huge difference. Check with your doctor what you can or can't try. Take back that control. It feels so good!

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