

Real Foods that Heal  
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### Onions decrease cancer risk

From the earliest recorded history, allium vegetables, including especially garlic and onions, have played a prominent role in food and culture. Recall for example the story of the Israelites grumbling about manna in the desert after Moses led them out of captivity in Egypt; what they were yearning for was “leeks, onions and garlic.” For thousands of years, these intensely flavorful vegetables have been treasured in traditional foods around the world. And at the same time, many cultures recognized quite early in history that they had medicinal value. More recently, onions (and their enticing aroma) have been featured prominently in the opening song on NPR’s “A Prairie Home Companion,”

“I hear that old piano from down the Avenue  
I smell the onions, I look around for you...”

It’s quite true that the powerful smells of foods easily evoke memories of people and events linked to them in our past. The smell of onions for me often brings to mind the many times during my youth when I would walk into my Aunt Helen’s kitchen around dinner time: onions were almost always on the menu. And that memory reminds me that she is now in her mid-80’s and still healthy, seemingly younger than her years. I wonder if it was all those onions....

This week I am highlighting the value of onions (*Allium cepa*) in cancer prevention. Specifically, the 2007 report of the American Institute for Cancer research affirms earlier evidence for the role of onion and garlic in the prevention of stomach cancer. Additionally, a very large population based study from southern Europe, published in 2006 in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, showed that onions have a protective effect against cancers of the larynx, colon/rectum, and ovaries. These scientific papers affirm the foundational principle of this bulletin, that increased intake of a wide variety of vegetables and fruits is a cornerstone of cancer and heart disease prevention, and that evidence gives special value to certain foods in the prevention of specific diseases. So if you are already a fan of onions several times weekly, feel good about your eating, and continue to expand your variety beyond that. If you do not regularly eat onions, experiment with different ways of cooking and preparing until you find enough ways to enjoy some onions at least twice weekly.

And since we have mentioned colorectal cancer, it’s a good time to emphasize the pillars of prevention for this second most common cause of cancer death for men and women in the US. For colon cancer prevention, your best bets are to maintain regular physical activity, restrict your intake of red and processed meats, eat more vegetables and fruits, keep body weight low to normal throughout life, and avoid excess alcohol (that is, no more than one drink per day for women, or two drinks per day for men).

In addition to its cancer preventing potential, we know that onions are high in fiber, have a very low glycemic load, are anti-inflammatory, and are a good

source of vitamin C. As you might guess though, I am not recommending onion rings (breaded and fried) as the fried batter creates an inflammatory health risk, so stay with raw, cooking in stews and soups, and sautéing in olive oil.

### Onion Soup

This is an adaptation of a 1959 recipe from House and Garden Magazine, by James Beard, the dean of American cooking. I have substituted olive oil for butter among other things.

Chop 4 large onions and sauté in a heavy pot with 6 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil. Add 3 cups of chicken or vegetable broth, one cup of dry white wine, and simmer for 20 minutes. Add salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste. It could be served like this, but if you want a traditional onion soup, top it with whole-grain croutons, sprinkle grated Parmesan cheese over the top and put it under the broiler briefly to melt the cheese. Garnish over the top with sprinkles of raw onion and parsley. I hope you will enjoy this soup several times this fall as the weather cools down!

To your health,

Robert Pendergrast, M.D.

[www.realfoodsthatheal.com](http://www.realfoodsthatheal.com)

P.S. You know 5 people who deserve to know how to reduce their disease risk by food choices. Please forward this e-mail to them by using the link below.

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