Beating Cancer With Lifestyle: A Doctor’s Personal & Clinical Journey Transcript

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Introduction to the cancer and lifestyle discussion

We see this remarkable rise in breast and colorectal cancer in young people. This is because we have totally weeded out anything healthy in our diet with ultra processed foods.

Because we sit too much, because young are drinking alcohol at too young of an age. In fact, today, when we're doing this recording, the Surgeon General just released that alcohol is the third leading cause of cancer.

There's just so many insults coming our way and we just have to really get back to the basics. It's not about some fancy pill or some fantasy potion or fancy procedure that's really going to show up for us, it's us that has to be there.

This is Doctor Talks. Welcome everybody to our plant-based cancer summit. This is just such a critical, important summit for you to attend and learn from.

And we're so lucky today to have with us a physician with so much experience, both personally and clinically with our patients and research experience too.

Her name is Dr. Dawn Masalam. and she's an oncology consultant at the Mayo Clinic and assistant professor of medicine there. And she is a board certified in lifestyle medicine and a breast specialist at Robert and Monica Jacoby Center for Breast Health.

She also serves as a medical director for the male clinic well-being committee and medicals director of the humanities and medicine. Very busy, a lot of obviously experience in this field we're talking about today in the month, right?

And she has a unique personal connection to her work because she herself had cancer. She actually had a stage four cancer diagnosed when she was in medical school.

And then in 2021, she actually, had her heart transplant, which is kind of amazing. So she shares her journey and this enabled her to redirect her practice and interest and cultivate her purpose to help people flourish during and after adversity.

Dr. Dawn Masalamu2019s personal cancer journey

So she has that ability to have compassion to actually have gone through this herself. Just amazing. And in 2015, she founded the Integrative Medicine and Breast Health Program at the Mayo Clinic in Florida.

She works with breast cancer patients both during an after their diagnosis with a goal to reframe their position as like a teacher of living and being how to properly live to discover renewed vitality through healthier living, to live with confidence, live longer, with their health and to help them recover and help survive.

So we're tremendously lucky to have somebody with this background and experience. Thanks for joining us. Oh, thanks, Dr. Furman. I'm so excited to be here.

It's so critically important, and thank you for mentioning the fact that I had my own personal journey because, gosh, I learned so much in medical school, but I learn so many more as a patient.

And I actually had a bone marrow transplant, You know, this is back in the day when you're kind of like, you know as the girl in a bubble, they drop your immune system down with all this high dose chemotherapy.

So you can have no visitors during the hospital for a few months. You're in hospital a long time. And I remember looking out and seeing everyone so sick.

I describe this every time I'm asked something related to this question. These folks were dying in an effort to stay alive, but I attained my vitality without pause.

My existence was so heightened because I was really taking good care of myself during this entire time, living those pillars of lifestyle medicine. A large part of it was that plant-based nutrition and exercise and faith-base practices, social connections, making sure I slept enough.

All of these things matter so much. There's no magic bullet. You have to show up for yourself. And it's so empowering. It really gives you autonomy over your diagnosis.

I think the healthcare establishment thinks that it could be a burden on people or a stress on. Still to this day, even my own institution, I recently had a metastatic pancreas cancer patient.

Even though my focus of my practice is primarily breast cancer, do see some patients who are unfortunately facing very critical metostatic disease and complications, and they want some answers in terms of lifestyle.

I recently had a woman that was having a lot of failure to thrive. She couldn't gain weight. And this woman asked to see me and she was so empowered to be told, no, let's try to do some lentil soup.

Let's do a smoothie with some berries and some soy and these healthy things in it. And so patients want to show up for themselves. We shouldn't give them these quick answers just to hush them up.

Instead, we need to guide them to this path of everything you've been practicing for years. I've admired all the work you have done for so many years because it's what the patients are really seeking to hear.

Wow. And how did you go through all that adversary? You had cancer, damaged your heart, and still managed to go to medical school? And you went through naturopathic school too?

and you also became an athlete? How did get that all done? And this is huge. My parents raised me in such a healthy lifestyle. We were raised in a whole food plant predominant lifestyle, exercise was a big part of what we did, we always had faith, you know, went to church every Sunday.

we were loving with our neighbors. It was just how we grew up. And so that really taught me the foundation of living healthy early on. I went on to naturopathic school and from there I wanted to learn a little bit more.

Why plant-based living matters for cancer prevention

I knew that perhaps a traditional path of education with medical school was right for me. So I applied to one osteopathic in Arizona and I played that single osteopathy school because they had a really robust nutritional training program.

And I really wanted it to kind of continue that natruropathy philosophy that I enjoyed but to embrace it with a little bit more clinical science and the ability to practice a lot more traditional medicine, combined that integrative modality.

And it was three months in a medical school that I was diagnosed with my cancer. It was misdiagnosed for many months, but because I took such good care of myself, I had such a high reserve, um, was I diagnosed at a very late stage.

Unfortunately, those treatments, Back, this was in the year 2000. This was over 24 years ago. My tumor was around my heart, so the radiation actually had to go right to my hear.

In an effort to help cure my illness, they knew that this collateral damage was a big possibility. And I have a lot of

people say, well, wait a minute, you took care of yourself.

You may not be the best poster child of a healthy living, but the truth is I would not here today. I wouldn't have this incredible vitality. More alive than any other human walking the planet.

Despite having all these adversities and health challenges, I never once really felt like I lost a beat. I felt really empowered and blessed to have been given parents that showed me how to take good care of myself and the importance of that.

And this is a huge call out to patients and families because I have women. The majority of my practice are women and they come and say, yeah, Dawn, I really want to take better care of myself, but my husband's not going to want me to do this.

My kids aren't going want do to this and this is something the whole family should be a part of. You see this remarkable rise in breast and colorectal cancer in young people.

This is because we have totally weeded out anything healthy in our diet and ultra processed foods. Because we sit too much, because young people are drinking alcohol at too young of an age.

In fact, today, when we're doing this recording, the surgeon general just released that alcohol is a third leading cause of cancer. Yes, there's just so many insults coming our way and we just have to really get back to the basics.

It's not about some fancy pill or some, fancy potion or, some you know, a fancy procedure. that's really going to show up for us. It's us that has to be there.

And I would say one thing that is really important when I meet with my patients is how I show it for ourselves. You know, this is to nourish our body, to love our bodies.

We shouldn't be turbulent about it. So we have to kind of like check in, dial in and do this in a way that very meaningful and out of that lens of love.

I think that so important. And I think the people going to doctors and oncologists, they lose this respect for the power of healthy natural foods and putting all those phytochemicals and phytonutrients in the body to boost the immune system to recognize.

Because they're thinking like, you've got to kill the thing with radiation or chemo. But of course, as you know, there's always escaped cells that can still be scattered and come back for recurrences years later.

And our findings are the strengthened immune system is able to seek out those stray cells, that escaped and prevent recurrence and enhance survival. But I know you're working a lot with breast cancer patients too.

So it's really exciting to see us so aligned and seeing And what I'm saying right now is that people think the power is all in chemo and not the powerful of the own body to do the healing when you establish optimal nutrition, right?

I can't agree more. It's a collaborative effort. At the same point, I would say that once you have cancer, We have to get rid of it. I do believe that the majority of cancers, especially those that are invasive cancers need chemotherapy, need radiation.

They probably need some traditional form of treatment to getting rid that heavy burden supported by healthy living with that whole food plant-based nutrition.

It is so critical and the research is proving this to us. You've promoted this for years. The research has been there for many years, but people are finally starting to pay attention because we're at this critical disease epidemic.

I mean, you know, we can't keep pushing this any further. And it's so challenging when I see 20-year-old women

with breast cancer that have no family histories, no genetic links, and they're getting these cancers.

Same thing with colorectal cancer. You just have to ask the question why. It is because of this very insulting lifestyle that Women are living when they're pregnant with that baby in their belly, and we know that epigenetic influence is starting then.

So moms, when you're pregnancy, this isn't the time to be liberal with how we live. We want to really nourish the body, nourished the baby, because that's going to set the stage for later on when that maybe becomes a young child, an adolescent, a younger adult and beyond.

So I really am so excited where we're at in science. I love that Mayo Clinic is so supportive in this space. It's just vast the opportunity that we are really coming out and answering that call to action in the space of promoting healthy living.

And I think people get the opposite. We should talk about this research differentiating plant protein from animal protein and how animal proteins can accelerate all-cause mortality and higher plant-protein foods can lower all cause mortality.

And then we have to touch on this idea that people think fish is so healthy. When we're actually seeing more and more the plastics, the BMAA toxins from the cyanobacteria, we are seeing so much toxicity.

Fiber, gut health, and survival after diagnosis

in seafood which people are told is health food which is probably further driving cancer epidemic. So it's just we have to rely on these clean plant-based proteins today.

Exactly. It gives me chills actually. I love the most recent nurses health study that was published this year with almost 50,000 women. They followed them for over 30 years and what they showed is the path to healthy aging and I share this with all my patients.

Because there's no better question to ask. Whether you have cancer, whether you heart disease, diabetes, early cognitive decline, or whether your healthy.

But the biggest thing we all want is to be on earth and age healthy, we want to feel good when we're old. And what the study did is it proved that, that yes, the plant protein for every 3% increment increase in energy from plant proteins, it enhanced that healthy aging by 38%. It did much better than any other animal protein, including dairy.

I mean, so it's like hands down, I'm done. It's not getting better, right? There's all the questions right there. There have been other studies that have said the same exact thing.

But for my patient population, this is so incredibly exciting. And it's so inexpensive. People are so worried about the cost of eating healthy. It is way cheaper to cook beans or have some edamame or tofu than it is to have animal protein.

So being plant-based isn't expensive. it does take a little more planning. You can't go through the fast food restaurant. But that's, again, part of showing up for yourself, nourishing yourself.

The amount of time people spend on social media, watching TV, or just sitting idle doing anything can be really part of this preparation of showing up for yourself so that you could be the healthiest version possible.

But I absolutely love that study. It's the greens, the beans, and the seeds that are these high-protein plant foods that also have all these phytochemicals that do a lot of other things besides produce good bacteria in the gut and other protective support immune function.

Do you know my G-bombs acronym that I've used? Yes. I know. That's perfect. Cool. Yeah, I really do. And I would

say that, you know, in America, everyone gets so hung up on protein.

Now I want to say, yes, protein is important. But nobody that comes to see me is protein deficient. Very few people come to me to say they are protein-deficient, they're all fiber- deficent.

No one is getting enough fiber. And fiber is fuel. Fiber is going to help to modulate the glycemic response to a carbohydrate that you're consuming. Everyone gives carbohydrates such a bad rap.

When you and I talk about carbohydrates, what we're thinking about are whole intact grains. When they're talking about carbohydrates, they are thinking about tortilla chips and white bread.

So it's like we have to make sure that we're all talking the same thing when we talk about carbohydrate. But carbohydrates rich in fiber, I have long conversations with my patients when you go to the grocery store.

What to look for in terms of really enhancing that fiber because that fibers fuel that Fiber is going to help to ignite the Immune system from a gut microbiome standpoint.

You had mentioned even resistant starches We know it helps to keep extra cholesterol helps take about extra estrogen Metabolically, it's more favorable in calorie density, and even the metabolism.

So I really think we just need to focus more on fiber. For my breast cancer patients, the American Institute for Cancer Research did a recent update over the past two years to show that for every 10 grams of fiber we increase in the diet, after breast-cancer diagnosis, we improve overall survival by 13%. I mean, that is so easy for every 10 grams.

So we look, okay, for breakfast, let's do some rolled oats with some soy milk and some berries and a tablespoon of flaxseed. You get 16 grams of fiber.

I means, it's so to do this, you know? And it is really exciting, I feel. And I share the science with my patients because that's what they want to hear as well.

There is proof that this helps. You know, so I really believe in helping to inform patients with accurate science that we have hundreds of thousands of person years of research to support.

These aren't opinions. This is actually rooted in deep science for decades, decades and decades back. So it really feels good to be able to practice that sort of medicine.

That's great. It's good to segue from that because you're making a good point is that people should differentiate the deep science that we have that's really solid about high nutrient plant foods, getting a wide diversity of colorful plants, extending lifespan in people who have cancer or reducing risk of getting cancer, which is the same thing.

And then they embrace, instead of embracing these things that have power, They embrace some of these alternative treatments that don't have the science because they're looking for a gimmick or a trick to go away to Mexico for week and get ozone therapy or whatever, or to take sonogram heat treatment or put their body under heat or take whatever it is they are doing.

You know, we have so many things that have proven science and they're grasping on to straws with these things, that don't have much proof. So the money's at what we know really does work.

I completely agree. It's as simple as this. If there's one takeaway, make sure you get five servings of vegetables and fruits a day. And for you and I, That's a huge underestimate.

Well over more, honestly, but let's just keep it simple, right? Just try to get five or more servings of vegetables and fruits a day. We know in patients who get two or less, which that sounds ludicrous.

It sounds like that's not possible, Right? The majority of the folks listening here probably are pretty mindful of health.

Evidence-based nutrition versus unproven therapies

And they're probably closer to that five, but believe it or not, the majority of people I see in my clinic are getting less than two servings of vegetables and fruits a day.

In fact, if we look at the research across America, one out of 10 Americans gets the recommended serving of vegetable and fruit. I did a study at Mayo Clinic and we looked at almost 800 breast cancer patients and showed that 95% are not getting the recommend vegetables or fruits today.

It's unbelievable what we see. And we know that in people who get five or more servings of vegetables and fruits a day, you improve survival from cancer by 10%. That simple, just from getting five, five more surveys of vegetable fruits today.

So it's not even that hard. It such an easy thing. Like you said, we now when you have more variety of different foods, getting a diversity of these vegetables of fruits, not locking into any one type, but trying to get a lot of colors, they can be frozen.

Folks think that they have to be fresh, but you can do frozen vegetables and fruits. They're going to give you just as much nutritional value. In fact, the berries have more nutritional values.

So, you know, fresh or frozen, vegetables, and fruit, getting those whole grains, That's what's going to diversify that gut microbiome. And you know, I really, you get excited about fiber, but I get exciting about favor because of the gut micro biome and when we really want to get fancy, You mentioned ozone.

We were even chatting about methylene blue and some of these really what sounded to be exciting treatments. that some people fly to other countries to try to augment their cancer effects because there's a lot of these claims that maybe these things can help, and there is really not enough science to support that.

And could those things even be dangerous? What I would invite patients to do is eat a healthy diet with a wide variety of whole plant foods, trying to get at least 30 different plant food a week enhances that gut microbiome.

We know that's going to enhance your immune system. You're going have better surveillance over cancer. Your body's gonna be on better alert for God forbid there's the one cancer cell that got away to keep that cancer cells not able to engage.

When we think about immunotherapy, oh my goodness, the majority of my patients are getting immunotherapies now. Even for breast cancer? Yes, widely we use immunotherapy.

So my practice is so busy with immunotherapy patients that my colleagues send to me, Dawn, we want you to enhance the gut microbiome. I have a very exciting study that I'm working to get funded.

It's very hard to these studies off the ground to look at the impact of a whole food medically tailored diet during chemoimmunotherapy and actually look of chemotherapy on the breast tumor itself, with the chemotherapy, as well as the gut microbiome.

We know what we're seeing. we know that we see that our women who are undergoing these treatments, eating these healthy diets are, first of all, they're thriving.

They're feeling very good with low toxicity. But the question is, is we actually think that they are having very enhanced outcomes as we'll see this in melanoma patients.

Why would we not see it in breast cancer patients? It was funny, you know, years ago when They made that link,

wait a minute, immunotherapy is working better in patients with melanoma who have more diverse gut microbiomes.

Every oncologist started saying, take a probiotic, Yeah, right. It's not that. Just diversify your diet. They later found that, wait a minute, beans are the best way to really enhance that gut microbiome, resistant starches.

So, you know, the gut micro biome. This is going to be a hot area of research. Because that's really where the individualized nutrition is gonna, I feel, come from.

But it's going take us a while longer to understand that so in the meantime, we know getting diversified plant diet is your answer to optimizing that good health.

Yeah, that's interesting because we're doing the frontiers of nutritional clients here by putting in all these diverse substances. Instead of relying on taking lactobacilli or taking one probiotic, we are trying to take wheat germ and beans and mushrooms and curcumin and we're doing a whole bunch of things and sprouts and different types of green vegetables and raw and cooked and mixing all these things.

So it's almost like precision nutrition. Take a person who has poor immune function and give them that boost to have super immune functions with all of these healthy foods.

I mean, it gives me chills. I want to do a podcast where they didn't have all my patients in the room with me and be like, look at these women. They're so incredibly inspiring.

The majority of breast cancer patients gain weight during treatment. So the other really nice thing that we can see is when you're on a plant-based diet during, we don't pause.

You're diagnosed. We want you to start eating healthy from the time of diagnosis. I'm very aggressive. I don't want it to be stressful, but the majority of patients find this very empowering.

And if I do sense stress, then back off. We want to meet the patient where they're at. If it's just a tiny little adjustment, that's better than nothing.

This doesn't have to perfect. this is about progress. It doesn' have be perfection.

Supplements, deficiencies, and holistic care

For me, this like harmony, I get pure joy out of this. and I find my patients do too. They want this, they just want the resources to know how to do it.

It's empowering. I think it gives them hope too because we have so much data to show that it can help them. Otherwise, they're being hopeless with what the expectations are conventionally because this does work.

By the way, do you utilize any supplements to add to the plant-based diet or to even add the type of herbs or things they get for their cancer treatments?

I really do. I was one of the co-authors for the American Society of Clinical Oncology, integrated modalities that are used during and after a breast cancer diagnosis that were really rooted in science.

So I rely on that to inform me with some of integrative approaches to care that I use. So one example of a supplement that I do use in my patient population, actually during chemo, if they have chemotherapy associated fatigue, which is very common among all cancer patients, but we did a study and we do it twice at Mayo Clinic with American ginseng.

And it really enhances energy. So I do use American ginseng in my patients. I use a database called Natural Medicine Database to determine which brands patients should use so that they're getting safe brands.

It's very important that if a patient is using a supplement, that their using the brand that is certified, whether that's USP or whether it's NSF or that particular company preferably has a medical advisory board to help guide them with product development Those are some of the things that I really want people to look at, but fortunately when I see them, I can guide them.

But you know, for folks on a whole food plant-based diet, i do check for vitamin deficiencies. At least 31% of Americans have vitamin deficiency. It's actually a much wider range that i'm seeing in my patients.

I see a lot of zinc deficiency. I seen a substantial amount of selenium deficiency, I've seen lot B6, B12 deficiencies, and these are B-12 deficiency of people on animal-based diets as well.

These are just very common things I have seen in my practice for many, many reasons. If I do check fatty acid profiles of my patients, so as you would expect, they see lot omega-3 fatty acids deficienties, these aren't people eating fish because the majority of them are eating like tilapia and things that are hitting them, you know, omega 3 fatty-acids, then they're not doing any plant sources of omega three fatty acids.

people to get flaxseed. I want them to gets walnuts. So I do see a substantial amount of vitamin deficiencies and this is a huge shout out to vitamin D3.

For cancer survivors, there's a lot of robust data for colorectal cancer patients, but having vitamin d optimized as a cancer survivor is critical, even if it takes supplementation to So there's a lot of controversy as to if vitamin D supplementation prevents cancer, that's fine.

We're going to talk to survivors right now and say there is enough data to say if you're a survivor, we want to make sure your vitamin B3 is optimized and you want take vitamin d3 to get you there.

I see a lots of patients coming in and they have vitamin deficiency and their doctor puts them on vitamin b2, but it would be the vitamin t3 that they would want Preferably, I'd rather people get a little bit of sunshine so that they can have appropriate hormone synthesis of that vitamin D.

It's really a hormone, not a vitamin, but we do want to be mindful of the fact that if they're overexposed to sun, that could give them a potential other risk with skin cancers.

But 20 minutes a day of direct sunlight on the larger body parts is what I would prefer for my patients to try to get. And that can also be very important.

I try to, you know, of course, not just focus only on the nutrition. I look at the entire body. So when it comes to sleep, that sun is something I really want my patients as soon as they wake up in the morning, get that first daylight sun, a little bit of vitamin D exposure, raise that melatonin and helps them sleep better at nighttime too.

Those are just some of the basic vitamins that I want people to look. And I do have my patience on a high quality multivitamin. I know that's all situations.

Most of my patients usually need a little bit of extra vitamin D as a result. I do use a lot of magnesium supplementation at nighttime just to help for restorative relaxation at night time.

There is reported magnesium deficiencies, but most of the lab assays are hard to really ascertain that because it's not the red blood cell magnesium that most labs are checking.

But magnesium deficiency is quite common among most folks, probably not as much among the plant-based folks than most of the Americans. So that's usually my lineup.

Well, yes. You're truly holistic is in the real sense of, the word is like lifestyle medicine. Holistic means you look at all the possible risk factors and you try to improve the person in all areas of their life.

Closing reflections and episode sign-off

But that word's been hijacked to people to be using all types of selling them different types of therapies and not looking at what the person could do to improve their life.

And I think that you really embody that type of being a lifestyle medicine physician. So I'm really excited to know you and to see the work you're doing.

It's so warm and exciting to have you be part of this group, part this session, and be here in the world helping people like you are. I have a lot of gratitude for that.

Oh, thank you so much, Dr. Furman. Well, I can't thank enough for all the work that you've done over the years to help to pave the path for people like me.

You've made it easy, but gosh, just have so energy and enthusiasm over this because I carry that energy forward that I'm able to receive from my patients.

seeing them do so well, see so many miracle stories and see them really able to flourish beyond a diagnosis of cancer. So this is just a huge shout out to folks to really enjoy the opportunity to be healthy and to prepare that beautiful food for both you and your family, you know.

All right. Well, thanks again for joining us and all of you listening. I'm sure you got a lot out of this today and wishing you all much health and happiness.

Take care, everybody. Thank you. Thanks, Dr. Berman. I really appreciate it. Thank you for tuning in to Dr Talks. We hope today's episode has enlightened and inspired you on your path to optimal health.

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