

Scientists Study Links Between Diet And Cancer

By Lee Hinnant
CHAPEL HILL — As more links are found between diet and cancer, researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and elsewhere are trying to identify those links and determine the specific health risks.

on coffee take a group of cancer patients, ask them a barrage of different questions, then try to compare them with healthy people by asking them the same things. Sandler said much of the difficulty comes from trying to find the group

for comparison. He said certain types of people were missing from the control group in the coffee study.

He compared this type of research to going fishing.

"The thing about going fishing," Sandler

said, "is there's a good chance you might catch something. It is important to confirm this finding in other studies."

Sandler said another study linked decaffeinated coffee to cancer. There was no distinction between cof-

ees in the *New England Journal of Medicine* article. Prior to 1975, a chemical was used to decaffeinate coffee that is now a known carcinogen.

Saccharin is a substance that has political implications as

well as chemical ones. Congress took steps to continue the use of saccharin although there is some evidence it causes cancer.

The problems of saccharin are not just recent. The first attempts to ban it were in 1906

when Theodore Roosevelt was President. Roosevelt said anybody who thought saccharin caused cancer was an idiot.

Studies since then have shown that rats given high doses of saccharin get bladder cancer

Sandler said that high doses were a common criticism of the animal studies, but that this is an accepted method of testing.

"The only way to get around the constraints of time and number of (Continued on Page 19)



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"It's pretty clear that diet is related to cancer," said Dr. Robert Sandler, an instructor in the UNC-CH schools of Medicine and Public Health. Sandler has been studying patterns of digestive cancers among groups of people, trying to identify those who have high risk and the reason for that risk.

He and other researchers, including a number of nationally known experts in cancer research, discussed the ties between diet and cancer at a symposium here this Fall, sponsored by the UNC-CH Clinical Cancer Education Program and Cancer Research Center.

Among the symposium topics were alcohol, coffee and saccharin, all substances that have come under increasing scrutiny from cancer researchers.

Studies have indicated an association between alcohol and cancer of the mouth, esophagus, larynx and liver. Sandler said there is the suggestion of a cause-effect relationship, since similar results have come from different studies in a number of countries, even when the research accounted for other risks, such as smoking. Finally, those who drink more tend to have more of these cancers. This is known as a dose-response relationship.

"Alcohol is a difficult substance to study," Sandler said. "One reason is it's hard to determine just how much people really drink."

Also, people who drink often do other things that can harm them, such as smoking, he said. Another complication is that heavy drinkers often do not eat properly, since alcohol is loaded with calories. This can lead to nutritional defects which themselves might be responsible for cancer.

"When pure alcohol is given to lab animals," Sandler said, "they don't get cancer." Alcoholic beverages, however, are seldom pure alcohol. Wine, for instance, has about 1,500 different substances in it that give the drink body, flavor and aroma. Some experts recommend drinks like vodka or gin, which have fewer extra compounds than Scotch or red wine.

Sandler said that because of the research limitations, there is no scientific consensus on how alcohol causes cancer.

"If alcohol really promotes cancer," he said, "it's hard to decide how it does that."

"There are so many other problems with alcohol...I would recommend moderation," Sandler said. "There is some evidence that moderate alcohol consumption is good for your heart."

Sandler said coffee and its possible risks are getting publicity, largely due to a 1981 article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which told of a study showing a strong association between coffee drinking and pancreatic cancer. Pancreatic cancer is a particularly dangerous type and was associated with coffee drinking regardless of the patient's use of tobacco, alcohol or tea. The study also found a significant dose-response relationship among coffee drinkers.

Based on the study's findings, one of its authors said he would stop drinking coffee.

However, Sandler said, "I think most people would not see this as demonstrated evidence that coffee causes cancer."

Studies such as the one