

Introduction to the Workshop on Fat and Cancer

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Interrelationships between fat and cancer have been the subject of experimental studies for 40 years. The interest in this topic has fluctuated as other aspects of medical research have taken center stage, but there has always been a cadre of scientists interested in this topic. Nutrition and cancer has recently become of prominent interest in both scientific and lay circles. Scientific endeavor involves attacks on problems from many angles and with many viewpoints. The principal aim of the research, curing a disease, for instance, is clear to all the participants in the scientific arena. Their critiques help to improve their focus on the problem and all will be convinced by unequivocal demonstration of mechanisms, causes, and treatments. The scientific contention is based on discussions of work in progress and most scientists take the polemics in that light. This is not true for the general public who have been conditioned to accept scientific pronouncements as ultimate truth. With the currently intense interest in diet and disease in a climate where an offhand scientific observation can be conveyed across the country in minutes, it is important that we can classify what we know with certainty and what is conjecture. This will clarify matters in the scientific mind. We cannot anticipate or be responsible for the next generation of dietary

self-help books, but we can be aware of what is and what is not known.

It was in this sense that the National Cancer Institute Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer Program organized this Workshop on fat and cancer to serve as a guide to current knowledge and new directions in research. The purpose of this Workshop was not to promulgate dietary policy but rather to expose experts in one area of this field to the data and ideas available from another. With this in mind, a plenary program was organized in which the major areas of concern would be summarized. These areas are epidemiology, experimental technique, dietary fat and cancer, the role of lipids in immune function, the influence of obesity and hormones, and, finally, a discussion of lipids in atherosclerosis since there are some data which suggest that low serum lipids may be correlated with cancer.

Five working groups were convened on the topics of epidemiology; fatty acids and steroids; lipid metabolites and intestinal flora; the immune system; and hormones, fat, and cancer. The presentations of the Workshop participants and the summaries of their deliberations should help to illuminate the deficiencies of knowledge and research needs in this field.

Cancer Research

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