

An apple a day...

Keeping the doctor away is not always the best thing to do; nevertheless, the health benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables are now well known.

Apples are a good source of fibre and vitamins – especially vitamin C, but some other vitamins and minerals as well. In the fibre department, apples contain both soluble fibre – such as pectin which helps prevent the build-up of cholesterol in the lining of the blood vessels – and insoluble fibre, which provides bulk in the intestinal tract. This bulk enables a quick passage of food through the digestive system – just what the doctor ordered.

Probably the best known Australian apple is the “Granny Smith”. In 1838, Thomas and Maria (Granny) Smith migrated from Sussex, England to Ryde in NSW. It was some 30 years later that the famous green skinned apple was developed – apparently from the remains of some French crab-apples grown in Tasmania.

However, it’s the red apple which has greater significance this month. The red apple is the symbol of the Bowel Cancer and Digestive Research Institute; and Red Apple Day on June 10 aims to increase awareness of bowel cancer and other gastro-intestinal problems.

Other than skin cancer, bowel cancer is the commonest of all cancers affecting both men and women. There are 10,000 new cases of bowel cancer diagnosed every year; and there are twice as many deaths from bowel cancer in Australia as from motor vehicle accidents. One Australian dies from bowel cancer – also known as colorectal cancer (CRC) – every two hours.

Perhaps because these statistics are so frightening, there’s a reluctance for us to seek medical attention or even acknowledge the possibility of CRC. Nevertheless, bowel cancer is both treatable and curable.

In the early stages, bowel cancer often has no symptoms; but blood in the bowel motions, persistent changes in bowel habits (diarrhoea or constipation) frequent “wind” pains and loss of weight for no known reason, should all be investigated by your doctor. If a close relative has had bowel cancer, your own risk increases significantly, and a regular check-up is necessary.

If you turn 50, 55 or 65 before the end of 2010, you’re eligible to receive a free bowel cancer screening test as part of the Australian Government’s National Bowel Cancer Screening program. The test should arrive in the mail around the time of your birthday. Otherwise you can purchase a Rotary Bowelscan from participating pharmacies or log on to the website (www.bowelcanceraustralia.org). These simple to use tests identify so-called faecal occult blood – blood in the stool which may be an early sign of bowel cancer.

Bowel cancers usually begin as small growths called polyps. Most polyps cause no problems. However, over time, some polyps may become cancerous and their growth is then uncontrolled. It’s important therefore, to remove polyps as soon as they are detected. This procedure is carried out by means of a colonoscope – a long flexible tube which allows the operator (a specialist gastroenterologist) to visually assess the health of the rectum and the colon, and cut out any suspicious bowel tissue for further examination.

Apart from the existence of polyps, bowel cancer appears to be more common in people whose diet is high in fat, and low in fibre, fruit and vegetables. Smoking and alcohol consumption may also add to the risk.

So just crunching an apple a day won’t mean we have no need for a regular check-up; but along with other fruit and vegetables the apple may reduce our bowel cancer risk. We also need to limit our alcohol intake to no more than two drinks a day and we should definitely not smoke. It seems regular physical activity also reduces the risk.

Pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society’s Self Care material can give you more information about bowel cancer. For the location of your nearest Self Care Pharmacy check out the PSA website at www.psa.org.au or phone 1300 369 772 and ask the pharmacy for the fact cards titled *Fibre and Bowel Health* and *Fat and Cholesterol*. They contain some great hints on how to keep your bowel and also the rest of your body healthy and functioning well.