

# Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



## Surviving Cancer, Eating Well

*By the National Cancer Institute*

Over 13 million people living in the United States have had a cancer diagnosis. Many people who have had cancer want to eat a healthier diet. In the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City, home of the Columbia University Medical Center, dozens of Hispanic women who survived breast cancer have been participating in an innovative nutrition education and awareness program called *¡Cocinar Para Su Salud!* or *Cook For Your Life!*

Will this program help the women develop a healthier diet? Researchers from Columbia University are conducting a study to answer that question. Obesity and diets low in fruits and vegetables have been linked to an increased chance of breast cancer recurrence, so better dietary habits could potentially be lifesaving. Dr. Julia Rowland, Director of the National Cancer Institute's [Office of Cancer Survivorship](#), explained that "a healthy lifestyle after cancer can not only improve quality of life but may also improve how long survivors live after cancer."

### The Women

Fashion designer Ann Ogden, herself a breast cancer and kidney cancer survivor, created the not-for-profit organization [Cook For Your Life!](#). She was soon joined by another New Yorker with an interest in nutrition and breast cancer, Dr. Heather Greenlee, a medical researcher trained in holistic therapies and an assistant professor of epidemiology and medical oncology at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health and Herbert Irving Comprehensive Cancer Center. Dr. Greenlee wanted to see if the *Cook For Your Life!* program could change how people eat.

### The Classes

The two women found chefs, nutritionists, researchers at Columbia's Teachers College, and breast cancer oncologists who were eager to help develop a course based on the *Cook For Your Life!* program that could be scientifically tested. They designed a study to determine if Latina women recovering from breast cancer who took the course would actually eat more fruits and vegetables and less fat during the subsequent year. The course that Dr. Greenlee and her team designed involved nine weekly meetings on Saturday mornings, conducted entirely in Spanish. The women learned about nutrition and how to shop for and cook nutritious foods. A

basic principle of the study is to deliver the message about healthy cooking and eating in a culturally sensitive manner. For example, flan is a custard dessert that is very popular in American Hispanic culture, and all the women in the class said at first that they had been making it for years and didn't need any new lessons. However, a recipe that isn't quite as heavy on eggs, sugar, and condensed milk as the original recipe has convinced many of the women that you can make changes to tradition, without sacrificing taste.

### **The Implications**

Compared with people of healthy weight, those who are obese or overweight are at greater risk for many diseases, including certain cancers. Two out of three adults in the United States are overweight or obese, and the rate is even higher in Hispanic women. However, it remains unclear how to best to address the overlapping epidemics of cancer and obesity. The *Cook For Your Life!/Cocinar Para Su Salud!* study, which will be completed in 2013, has the potential to change how cancer survivors are taught about healthy eating and weight management.

For people who want to learn more about cancer survivorship, an NCI booklet can help: [Facing Forward: Life After Cancer Treatment](#). A companion booklet for caregivers is also available: [When Someone You Love Has Completed Cancer Treatment](#). Or visit the website of the Office of Cancer Survivorship at <http://dccps.cancer.gov/ocs/>.

*NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI web site at [www.cancer.gov/espanol](http://www.cancer.gov/espanol) (or [m.cancer.gov](http://m.cancer.gov) from your mobile device) or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at [www.cancer.gov/lifelines](http://www.cancer.gov/lifelines).*