

How a scientist reversed his biological age and why it could help prevent cancer

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Cancer researcher Prof. Godfrey Grech has been inspired by his own health journey. Photo: Jonathan Borg

At the age of 50, Prof Godfrey Grech found himself facing an unsettling reality. Despite being a cancer researcher and advocate for health, his own body was telling a different story.

High cholesterol, high blood pressure, thyroid dysfunction, chronic inflammation and mild dysbiosis had crept up on him. He was also overweight, tipping the scales at 98kg. He was “making a mess of my health”, he says.

Today, at 52, Grech is 24kg lighter and has a new lease on life.

Tests suggest his biological age, previously 58, is now 46. The transformation, he insists, wasn't about quick-fix diets or miracle cures. It was rooted in science with simple lifestyle interventions that focus on gut health.

In science terms, it comes from rebalancing the microbiota of the intestines, which results in less inflammation and better health-promoting compounds entering the body.

“Metabolic health is, after all, about creating the right balance to produce the right health-promoting compounds,” Grech explained. And it all starts with the gut.

New approach to cancer prevention

For the past 18 years, Grech has been leading investigations into oncology at the University of Malta, focusing on early cancer detection.

He specialises in the prevention of colorectal cancer, one of the country's most common cancers. There are 300 new cases of colorectal cancer a year.

In the last two years, he has shifted his attention to lifestyle medicine.

Research suggests that at least 60 per cent of colorectal cancers could be prevented through lifestyle changes. But mainstream medicine still tends to focus on treating disease.

The key lies in the intestines, says the scientist, who focuses on chronic inflammation because he believes – “and now I know” – that intestinal function is crucial for metabolic health.

Aside from cancer, metabolic diseases - from diabetes to obesity and anxiety - can be treated through gut health.

“We think the function of the intestine is only absorption and digestion,” he says. “But it is also a school for immune cells; where they learn about the environment.”

Inflammation is the body's way of responding to threats. But when it becomes chronic, due to stress, poor diet or imbalances in gut bacteria, it can set the stage for disease. People with chronic intestinal inflammation, for example, have a 75 per cent higher chance of developing colorectal cancer.

“It is not about the food we eat but what we convert from it into the health-promoting compounds we need,” he says.

“The intestines are the engine, and the food is the fuel. But if you have the best fuel and your engine is not working well, then it is problem. If there is an inflammation of the intestine, the immune cells are in havoc.”

With 100 trillion bacteria in the gut, where most conversions occur, imagine no discipline, he says. If there is an imbalance in these bacteria, there is a problem because the right conversions cannot be carried out.

Rethinking food stress and medicine

Malta has a particular problem when it comes to a balanced diet.

The rise of take-away culture has made unhealthy eating more convenient than ever, and the concept of a balanced diet is misunderstood, he says.

“Patients come to us saying they eat healthy ingredients. But this does not necessarily mean they have a healthy, balanced diet. If you only eat avocados because they are healthy, it is not a balance,” says the scientist.

““ *If you prevent inflammation, you can prevent most of these illnesses*

- Prof. Godfrey Grech

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Extreme diets, stress and even certain medicines can disrupt gut health. But, through a personalised approach, what he calls ‘biohacking’, these imbalances can be identified and corrected.

Using a diagnostic test that measures chronic inflammation and provides information on biological age, Grech has been able to track his own progress.

His personal interventions included probiotic-rich foods and a high-fibre diet and, gradually, his inflammation levels dropped.

“Although I am hesitant to say this because, of course, I am in favour of medication when it is needed, I have now phased it off,” he says.

Taking lifestyle medicine to the community

Inspired by his own transformation, Grech is now pushing for lifestyle medicine to become a mainstream part of medical practice in Malta.

He is now an “innovator” of lifestyle medicine health programmes.

A new diagnostic dysbiosis test for inflammatory disease, for example, provides bacterial information for a diet intervention, with a specific prebiotic plan to rebalance it.

He has joined forces with an exercise and nutrition scientist and put together a team of healthcare professionals, focusing on diet and “prescribed” exercise, stress and anxiety management, sleep deprivation – all connected to gut health.

He is part of the scientific council and the ambassador of the European Lifestyle Medicine Organisation (Elmo).

Against ‘alternative’ but in favour of ‘combinatory’ medicine, Grech is now in the process of setting up the Maltese Society of Lifestyle Medicine under the umbrella of the European Lifestyle Medicine Council.

The next step for the society is to introduce a lifestyle medicine module in the specialisation of family doctors. Discussions are underway and this is imminent, Grech says.

The society would also aim to support cancer research projects, going into the community to offer simple tests among asymptomatic people and raise awareness about lifestyle health.

“We have to go into the community to tell people this because you can prevent not only cancer but also metabolic disease,” he says. “If you prevent inflammation, you can prevent most of these illnesses.”

His own “profound transformation” from an “unhealthy” 50-year-old to a 52-year-old in “excellent health” is proof of what’s possible.



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