

Obituaries

# Paul Talalay, researcher who found cancer-preventing qualities in broccoli, dies at 95

By [Emily Langer](#)

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Paul Talalay, a pharmacologist who spearheaded research in the 1990s that identified the cancer-preventing properties of a compound found in broccoli, a discovery that was credited with bringing new scientific attention to ways of combating cancer before it takes hold, died March 10 at his home in Baltimore. He was 95.

The cause was congestive heart failure, said his daughter Susan Talalay.

Dr. Talalay, who was long associated with the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, spent the first decades of his career as an enzymologist, focused in particular on the proteins that interact with testosterone.

He had encountered his first cancer patient in medical school and, by the 1980s, had begun to cultivate a “daring thought that cancers of all sorts might actually be preventable,” said Jed Fahey, who joined Dr. Talalay’s lab in 1993 and is today a professor at the Johns Hopkins division of clinical pharmacology.

Dr. Talalay oversaw research that in the 1990s revealed intriguing qualities of sulforaphane, a compound found in broccoli and in even greater quantities in broccoli sprouts. When ingested, sulforaphane binds to a protein inside cells, said Philip A. Cole, a professor at Harvard Medical School and former student of Dr. Talalay’s. That event sparks the increased production of enzymes that help cells resist toxic substances, including carcinogens.

Consuming broccoli and other vegetables including kale and watercress helps the body create what Cole described as a “molecular defense” against “environmental insults” that might lead to cancer. He said Dr. Talalay’s research had a “broad impact both in biomedical research and in influencing what people eat to stay healthy.”

When Dr. Talalay began his work, he lamented the difficulty of convening even a few scientists interested in discussing dietary means of preventing cancer. “Now you can fill large convention halls with people who want to talk about prevention,” Fahey said. “There are thousands of people who are really riding the crest of the waves that he and very few others created.”

Theresa A. Shapiro, a clinical pharmacologist at Johns Hopkins, said that Dr. Talalay’s work “has been around long enough that it has penetrated into the clinic.” Subsequent studies have shown potential benefits of sulforaphane for conditions far beyond cancer, including diabetes and autism.

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Paul Talalay was born to Russian parents in Berlin on March 31, 1923. His father was a chemist, and his mother was a homemaker. The family, which was Jewish, fled Germany after Hitler came to power in 1933 and went first to England, where Dr. Talalay continued his schooling, and then to the United States in 1940.

Dr. Talalay received a bachelor's degree in molecular biophysics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1944 before graduating from Yale School of Medicine in 1948.

He joined the University of Chicago faculty and, in 1958, he received a grant of more than \$500,000 from the American Cancer Society to support his research until he met retirement age. It was at the time the society's largest grant ever bestowed on a single individual. He came to Johns Hopkins in 1963 and remained on its faculty until his death.

Survivors include his wife of 66 years, the former Pamela Samuels, of Baltimore; four children, Tony Talalay of Lutherville, Md., Susan Talalay of McLean, Va., Rachel Talalay of Vancouver and Sarah Talalay of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and four grandchildren.

In 1997, Dr. Talalay and Fahey founded Brassica Protection Products to market broccoli sprouts and other edibles with health benefits supported by their research. Dr. Talalay, whose honors included membership in the National Academy of Sciences, wore on his lapel a silver pin representing a broccoli sprout.


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Emily Langer is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. She writes about extraordinary lives in national and international affairs, science and the arts, sports, culture, and beyond. She previously worked for the Outlook and Local Living sections. Follow 

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