

How to Nourish Your Body While Being Treated for Cancer

Good nutrition can help you to handle any treatment for cancer better and speed your recovery. You may notice weight changes during your treatment. Some people may lose weight, while others gain.

If you are losing weight, eat more often, drink more fluids with calories, add fats and sugars to food if tolerated, and even give into cravings for unusual foods or drink if they help increase food intake. If you are gaining weight, choose foods that contain less fat and sugar. During treatment, try to maintain the weight you had before treatment if possible. If you need to lose weight, postpone a planned weight loss effort until after your treatment is over.

To eat enough calories, protein, vitamins, and minerals, follow these general guidelines:

1. Drink at least three cups of milk per day. Cheese, yogurt, ice cream and other dairy foods may be substituted.
2. Eat two or more three-ounce servings of meat or meat substitutes daily.
3. Consume at least two cups of fruit or juice daily.
4. Eat 2 ½ cups of vegetables daily. Choose more bright or deep colored ones like sweet potatoes, greens and tomatoes. Eat vegetables after eating the higher protein and calorie foods. Vegetables are nutritious, but their fiber may fill you up if they are eaten before other foods.



5. Eat six or more servings of bread and cereals. Try to have at least half of those servings come from whole grains like whole wheat bread, oatmeal, bran cereals, whole wheat pasta and brown rice unless you are having diarrhea.
6. Consume other foods such as desserts and beverages as desired.
7. Include nutritious snacks such as fruit, nuts, cheese and crackers between meals and before bedtime.

On the day of your treatment, you may want to eat more lightly. Good options suggested by the American Cancer Society are juice-type nutritional supplements that contain protein, dry crackers and toast, rice, pretzels, apple, cranberry or grape juice, decaffeinated tea or coffee, ginger ale, sports drinks, popsicles, fruit ices, sherbet or sorbet, and flavored gelatin

Here are suggestions for modifying your food intake if needed:

Boosting Calories

1. **Soft margarine** – Add regular, not light, margarine to hot foods such as toast, soups, vegetables, cooked cereal, rice, and eggs. One teaspoon has 45 extra calories.



2. **Vegetable Oil** - Sautée' vegetables in vegetable oils like olive, canola, soy or peanut oil. Dress salads with oil and vinegar. Dip bread in olive oil. Stir in small amounts of oil to cream soups, casseroles and sauces. Each teaspoon is about 45 calories.
3. **Sour Cream** – Use sour cream on baked potatoes, meats and fruits. One tablespoon contains 26 calories.
4. **Mayonnaise** – Use mayonnaise instead of salad dressing in meat, poultry and fish salads, deviled eggs, and on lettuce. It has 100 calories per tablespoon.

5. **Peanut Butter** – Serve peanut butter with an apple, banana, or pear or spread it on a sandwich. It is also high in protein. One tablespoon of peanut butter has 95 calories and provides almost 5 grams of protein.
6. **Whipped Cream** – Use whipped cream to top puddings, pies, hot chocolate, fruit, gelatin, and other desserts. One half cup equals 77 calories.

Use foods high in sugar and starch as snacks because they leave the stomach quickly. Choose those that are easy to fix and keep them on hand. For example, float marshmallows on hot chocolate. Spread honey on bread or pour it on cereal. Snack on hard candy, popsicles, popcorn, crackers and jelly.

Boosting Protein

Try high-protein foods to boost protein and calories without increasing the amount of food eaten.

1. **Milk** – Add skim milk powder to regular whole milk and chill well to improve flavor. Stir in chocolate or strawberry flavor if desired. Use skim milk powder to prepare sauces, gravies and creamed meat, fish, or poultry. Cook cereals in milk instead of water. Make instant cocoa, canned soups, and puddings with milk, or evaporated milk. Blend extra ice cream into milk shakes or liquid nutrition supplements like Instant Breakfast, Ensure[®] or Boost[®]. One cup of whole, low fat or skim milk has eight grams of protein.



2. **Meat, Fish, and Poultry** – Add small pieces of meat to soups and to vegetable, noodle, or rice casseroles. A three-ounce portion of beef, pork, lamb, fish, chicken or turkey has 21 grams of protein.
3. **Cheese** – Add grated cheese to cream sauces, casseroles or vegetables. Melt sliced cheese over hot apple pie and Irish and sweet potatoes. Combine cottage cheese or ricotta cheese with fruits. Sprinkle grated or shredded cheese on hot bread and rolls. A one-

ounce slice of cheese contains about seven grams of protein while ½ cup of creamed cottage cheese has 15 grams of protein.

4. **Eggs** – Blend finely chopped hard cooked eggs into sauces, gravies, and meat, poultry or fish salads. Make desserts that contain eggs such as angel food cake and custard. Only make eggnog from pasteurized frozen eggs or egg substitutes. Raw or undercooked eggs are not safe for a person with cancer. One egg has 7 grams of protein.

Eat favorite meals and snacks at the time of day when you like to eat best. You may eat better if someone else fixes these foods for you. Some people with cancer drink liquid nutrition supplements between meals or instead of meals if they are weak or have problems with swallowing or chewing. Others need special tube feedings. A special formula for this can be recommended by your doctor or dietitian.

Loss of Appetite and Changes in Taste

Few people with cancer lose their sense of taste completely. Some foods just taste differently. Sweet foods may be harder to taste while bitter foods may taste stronger. Everyone is different when it comes to changes in taste.

Protein foods sometimes taste bitter to someone with cancer. Eat protein foods that are cold or at room temperature. Good choices are cheese, luncheon meat, tuna, chicken, ham or egg salad, deviled eggs, ice cream, milk shakes, puddings, custards and nuts.

Protein foods may taste better with more salt. If you do not need to limit your sodium, try warm cured meats such as ham, Canadian bacon, low fat sausage, lean corned beef, and lower fat lunch meats or meats marinated in soy sauce.



Seasonings, like lemon juice, mint and basil, will help improve the taste and smell of food. Don't try to follow any particular rule in seasoning, use your imagination and experiment.

Marinated meats in sweet fruit juices or sweet wines or cook them with fruit to improve their taste. Fresh fruit, either cut-up or blended, may also improve the taste of milk shakes, ice cream, puddings, custards, and liquid

nutrition supplements. Consume fresh vegetables that may taste milder than canned or frozen.

Keep your mouth clean by rinsing and brushing often. Even rinse with salted water, ginger ale, tea or water with baking soda before meals to perk up your taste buds.

Eat in a pleasant place. Serve food of various colors on the plate and use garnishes. Pretty place settings and soft music can make meals more enjoyable. A calm room helps the person eat more. If metallic eating utensils taste strange, try plastic ones. Even bring a special picnic lunch with colorful utensils, plates and napkins to your treatments.

Don't worry about having the same food over and over again. Eat whatever tastes good as often as you want it.

Light exercise or a glass of wine may also help increase your appetite.

Feelings of Fullness, Nausea, Vomiting

When feelings of fullness, nausea, and vomiting are a problem, try to get food through the stomach as quickly as possible. Eating sweet or starchy food more often in small amounts may help. Fatty and fried food will make the problem worse because they take longer to digest. There will be more room for food, if you drink liquids one hour before or after eating.

Eating dry foods such as toast or crackers, particularly before getting up in the morning, seems to relieve nausea. Cold, clear liquids such as Kool-Aid® or soft drinks can help.



You may eat more if you eat slowly and chew food well. Rest after a meal because activity slows digestion, but recline with your head up for at least one hour.

Just the smell of food can cause nausea. Stay out of the kitchen while meals are being fixed and open windows to air the eating area. Also cold or room temperature foods smell less. If nausea becomes too severe, a doctor can prescribe medicine to help control it.

Dry or Sore Mouth and Sore Throat

If the mouth is dry, liquid or moist foods that are cool or lukewarm are easier to swallow. If you are not nauseated, soft margarine, gravy, or broth can moisten foods. Sauces or syrups may help, too. Many people dunk food in a drink or take a swallow of liquid with each bite of food. Take small bites and chew well.

When the mouth or throat is sore, soft, cold food such as ice cream, popsicles, watermelon, or grapes may be easier to eat. Tilting the head back or using a straw can make swallowing more comfortable. High acid foods such as citrus juices and tomatoes may cause pain, while sweet fruit drinks and nectars may be pleasant to drink. Alcohol can also irritate.

Frequent rinsing with water or salt water may prevent infection and improve healing. If pain is severe, a doctor can prescribe medicine to numb the mouth and throat.

Diarrhea and Cramps

Eating food warm instead of hot may prevent diarrhea. Diarrhea may also be controlled by drinking fluids between meals rather than with meals. Eating smaller amounts of food more often and more slowly may also help.

1. **Avoid things that can produce gas or cause cramps**, such as carbonated drinks, beer, chewing gum, beans, cabbage, highly spiced foods, skipping meals, and swallowing air while talking and chewing at the same time.
2. **Also lower the fiber in the diet.** Limit raw fruits and vegetables, wheat bran, other whole grain cereals and breads, popcorn, and nuts.

Large amounts of water, sodium and potassium are lost with diarrhea. Drink at least one cup of water for each loose bowel movement. Eat saltier foods like broths, pretzels and sports drinks. A doctor may suggest taking potassium supplements or eating more high potassium foods. Some foods high in potassium, that will not worsen diarrhea, are bananas, red meat, seafood and peeled potatoes. A doctor can prescribe medicine to help control severe diarrhea and cramping.

Constipation



Constipation can be a problem if a person eats or drinks very little. Try to drink 6-8 cups of fluid each day. Drugs to dull the pain and to fight the cancer can also cause constipation. High-fiber foods and prune juice act as laxatives. If there is trouble with chewing raw fruits and vegetables, try grating them. Also your dietitian can recommend liquid nutritional supplements that contain fiber if you cannot eat much. Light exercise may also help. A doctor can prescribe medication for constipation if necessary.

Depression

Depression is common among people who have cancer. At times, good nutrition may seem the least of your concerns. Even though eating right is important, do not become too upset if you cannot eat. There will be days when you may not eat as much as you would like. Mild exercise and even a funny book or video that causes a healthy belly laugh will help.

Cancer is a disease that requires a total mental and physical effort from you, your family and friends and your medical team. Eating right can be both challenging and rewarding. If you need more advice and encouragement, arrange for a visit with a registered dietitian. He or she can help you figure out how to eat right for your specific needs.

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