

Eating right for your health

When your health is already affected by cancer, it's important to support your immune system and keep up your strength by eating a balanced diet. You need to be well nourished to help your body cope with treatment and fight off any infections.

However, your treatment may affect your eating habits in various ways:

- You may feel hungrier than usual, and want to eat all the time
- You may not want to eat at all
- You may want to eat, but you can't because it makes you feel sick, or because your mouth's too dry, sensitive or painful.

"Being on steroids did make me more hungry."
23 year old (16 when diagnosed)

Keeping an eye on your weight

Your doctor, nurse and dietician will check your height and weight regularly to make sure you're eating enough, and to see what effect your treatment and food are having on your weight. They will also ask you about your appetite and whether you're having any problems eating or drinking.

Feel free to ask them any questions you want about your diet and how to make sure you're getting all the vitamins and minerals you need.

If your weight is affecting the way you feel

Losing or gaining weight can affect your confidence or your self-image. Download our factsheet **'How you look and feel'** for more information and ideas to help you.

Why it's important to eat the right food

Eating well can help you stay stronger, recover faster, fight infections, and cope better with the effects of cancer or your treatment. It will give you energy and reduce tiredness.

Balancing different kinds of food

You need to eat a range of different foods, including proteins, fats and carbohydrates. This table shows some of the different food groups and how they can help you:

Food group	What kind of food is it?	How does it work?
Proteins	Meat, fish, eggs, soya products (eg. tofu), pulses (beans, lentils), nuts	Your body needs protein for growth, muscle strength and healing wounds. Some of these foods also contain fats, and are good sources of energy.
	Dairy products: milk, cheese, cream, yoghurt, fromage frais, pasteurised goat's and sheep's milk products	Dairy products are also a good source of protein, as well as calcium and some vitamins. They can be helpful if you're losing too much weight.
Fats	Oil (eg. olive oil, sunflower oil), butter, margarine, ghee, cream	These are good sources of energy and contain fat-soluble vitamins.
Fruit and vegetables		Good sources of vitamins, minerals and fibre. They can also help to fill you up if you're feeling hungry all the time.

unread

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Food group	What kind of food is it?	How does it work?
Carbo-hydrates	Bread, rice, quinoa, millet, pasta, other wheat or grain products	Can be a good source of fibre and energy, and also help to fill you up.
	Sugars: sugar, honey, syrup, treacle, chocolate, cakes, sweets	Can help to boost your energy levels.

You should make sure you regularly eat food from all these groups.

You may feel like, or be able to eat, some foods in a group more than others, which is fine — but do try to eat some food from each group. Or if you're feeling adventurous, why not try something new? Eat what works for you in each group, and ask your family and those caring for you to support your choices as much as they can.

If you are a vegetarian or vegan, or do not eat certain types of food for cultural reasons, it is important to talk to the dietician so they can make sure you're getting all the nutrients you need.

“To get an intake of some fruit I would try and drink the small cartons of fruit smoothies.”

21 year old

Extra vitamins and minerals

You may feel you ought to take extra vitamin pills or supplements to help you keep as healthy as possible.

Most doctors will tell you that if you're eating a healthy, balanced diet you don't need extra vitamins. However, if you're having difficulty eating certain foods, perhaps

because they make you feel sick or your treatment makes them taste horrible, you may need to take a supplement. If you're worried that you're not getting enough vitamins, talk to your doctor or the dietician.

Some vitamins and minerals can be dangerous if you get too much of them, or may react badly with your treatment, so make sure you let your medical team know what you're taking.

Nutritional supplement drinks

If you find it easiest to take most of your food in liquid form, you can buy nutritional supplement drinks from most supermarkets and chemists. Most come in several flavours. You can also get some on prescription — ask your doctor or dietician.

Build Up, Complan, Recovery and Nutriplan are examples of high-energy, high-protein powders that you can mix with either milk or water and serve hot or cold. You can even add ice cream or yoghurt to thicken them up and add extra calories.

Special diets

You may read or hear about special diets that can 'cure' cancer — but there's no clinical evidence that this is true. Talk to your doctor or dietician if you're at all anxious about your current diet.

If you're having trouble eating

“I just don't feel hungry any more.”

This is usually a side-effect of your treatment, although it may also be caused by certain kinds of cancers.

- Try eating small meals throughout the day — say every 2-3 hours. Keep snacks handy so if you do suddenly feel like eating there's something tempting for you to nibble.

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- If your appetite's better at certain times of day, take advantage of this by eating a bit more while you can.
- Don't force yourself to eat fast, or to eat more than you want. Take your time and eat just the amount you feel like.
- Try to tempt yourself with foods that smell really good, like fresh bread, fried onions or roast chicken.
- Try to avoid being around foods or smells that put you off while you are eating.
- Don't feel you've got to eat certain foods, or at the right time of day; if you feel like eating a chocolate cake for breakfast — go for it!
- Ask your doctor, nurse or dietician whether they can recommend any medicine to help you.
- When you're eating or preparing a main meal, add mayonnaise, salad cream, extra cheese, paneer, cream – in fact any fats or dairy products that go well with it.
- With puddings, cereals or sweet drinks you can add extra sugar, honey, custard, cream, ice cream or syrup.
- Ask your dietician about energy supplements that you can add to your food.

"When I had a poor appetite: mash potato with butter and cheese melted into it."

23 year old

"I'm losing too much weight."

Before you had cancer, you probably thought losing weight was a good thing. You may even have been on all kinds of weight-loss diets and programmes. Now you have to think the other way round, and eat foods that will help you to build up your weight and strength.

You can do this by adding extra protein and energy to your food:

- Choose full-fat foods whenever you can – so avoid anything labelled diet, lite, light, or low-fat.
- Add extra butter, margarine or oil when you (or your parents, friends etc.) are preparing meals.
- Eat bread with fatty spreads like peanut butter, chocolate spread, lemon curd, honey, jam or marmalade.
- When you're eating or preparing a main meal, add mayonnaise, salad cream, extra cheese, paneer, cream – in fact any fats or dairy products that go well with it.
- With puddings, cereals or sweet drinks you can add extra sugar, honey, custard, cream, ice cream or syrup.
- Ask your dietician about energy supplements that you can add to your food.
- "Eating makes me feel sick."

"Eating makes me feel sick."

This could be due to your cancer, your treatment or your medication.

- Ask your doctor or nurse to recommend some anti-sickness (anti-emetic) medicine.
- Don't eat just before or immediately after your treatment.
- Try to eat small amounts throughout the day.
- Avoid anything greasy, like fried food, or with a strong smell or taste, like garlic or some cheeses. It's best to eat light, bland meals.
- Ginger or mint may help — try ginger biscuits, ginger ale, peppermint sweets or herb teas that include peppermint or ginger.
- Cold foods tend to smell less than hot foods, so try to eat things that taste better cold — like ice cream, yoghurt, cereal, biscuits or salad.
- Sucking sweets can sometimes help — try fruit sweets, mints or ice lollies.
- If you have a blender, try making some chilled smoothies that you can sip gently. This is a great way to make sure you get enough fruit or dairy products.
- Fizzy drinks can also sometimes help to settle your stomach.

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"Anything with ginger in it helped with nausea. I used to drink a small amount of ginger wine (non alcoholic) each night, which would help me sleep, and I also carried around a little vial of crushed ginger which I would smell when I felt particularly nauseous."

18 year old

"When I was suffering from nausea I always ate food that was pretty flavourless, such as crackers spread with a small amount of jam, or slices of packeted cheese."

18 year old

"My mouth and throat are too sore to eat."

This could be due to your radiotherapy or chemotherapy, or because you've picked up an infection.

- Ask your doctor or nurse for suitable medication or painkillers.
- Use a blender to puree your food or make up some nutritional drinks or smoothies.
- For main meals, try soft foods like omelettes, shepherd's pie, macaroni cheese or soup — but let them cool down before you eat them.
- Use extra sauce or gravy.
- Try soft, cold desserts that will slip down easily, like yoghurt, mousse or ice cream.
- It may seem obvious, but avoid rough, chunky, salty, acidic or spicy foods — like curry, chilli, crisps, peanut butter, oranges or vinegar.

"Ice cream would often make me feel better. Plain vanilla eases a hungry tummy, tastes nice, and never made me feel sick."

18 year old

"My mouth is dry all the time."

This could be caused by radiotherapy, chemotherapy or painkillers. A dry mouth can affect your sense of taste, and it also increases your risk of getting oral thrush.

- Ask your doctor or nurse for medicine, pastilles or even artificial saliva, and for a mouthwash to help prevent thrush.
- Sip cool drinks or suck ice cubes regularly to keep your mouth moist. Freeze your favourite drinks as ice cubes if you think normal cubes are too boring.
- Eat soft, moist foods with plenty of sauce, gravy, cream, juice, syrup or custard.
- Avoid salty, sticky or chewy foods like crisps, bread, cold meat or toffees.
- If you find that sucking sweets or chewing gum helps you, try to avoid sweets with very strong citrus flavours.

"I don't like the taste of my favourite foods any more."

Your treatment may have changed your sense of taste so that your favourite foods, or even all foods, taste different, dull or downright unpleasant. Your taste buds should return to normal eventually, but in the meantime:

- Talk to your doctor or nurse and ask their advice.
- This feeling may come and go. Take advantage of the times when some, or all, foods taste good and enjoy as much as you can.
- If you find red meat now has a metallic taste, try chicken, fish, eggs, cheese, beans or lentils instead. Using a plastic knife and fork instead of metal ones can also help.
- If savoury foods taste dull, try foods with a stronger flavour, like spicy sausages, curries, crisps or marmite. Add more flavour to your foods with salt and pepper, herbs, spices, marinades, sauces and pickles.

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- If you've gone off savoury foods altogether, eat more fruit and desserts.
- If you have a disgusting taste in your mouth all the time, try sucking strong sweets or mints.

"Some things I wanted to eat didn't taste how I imagined."

23 year old (16 when diagnosed)

"Normal food gives me diarrhoea."

This could be due to your treatment or your cancer, and it is important to make sure you don't become dehydrated.

- Talk to your doctor or nurse about possible medicines or treatment.
- Drink plenty of fluids — these can include fruit juice, soup, fizzy drinks and tea as well as water.
- You may find it helps to cut down on dairy products, including milk and soft cheeses. Try rice or soya milk instead.
- Eat little and often — snacks rather than full meals.
- Avoid high-fibre foods like beans, lentils, wholemeal breads, cabbage, brussels sprouts, wholegrain cereals or dried fruit.
- Also avoid alcohol, excessive coffee and spicy food.

"I keep getting constipated."

Once again, this could be caused by either the cancer or your treatment, particularly if you're on painkillers.

- Talk to your doctor or nurse about possible medicines or treatment.
- Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and other high-fibre foods, like beans, lentils, wholegrain cereals, wholegrain bread and pasta, or dried fruit. **However, if your constipation is caused by your treatment, high-fibre food may not be the answer, so check with your medical team first.**
- Drink plenty of fluid — up to 10 glasses a day.