

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 your 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.

This information sheet provides suggestions that can help you cope with these problems, as well as general information about eating well at this time.

Keeping an eye on your weight

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

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

If your weight is affecting the way you feel

If you're losing or gaining weight as a result of your treatment, it can sometimes affect your confidence and self-image. You may want to download our information sheet *How you look and feel* for some ideas to help you through this time.

Why it's important to eat the right food

Eating well can help you keep up your strength, so you will recover faster, fight infections, and cope better with the effects of cancer or your treatment. The right food will also give you energy and reduce how tired you feel.

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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 their impact on your health.

You may feel like, or be able to eat, some foods within a group more than others. This is fine, but do try to eat food from all of these groups as regularly as possible. 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 are getting all the nutrients you need.

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. They also provide calcium and some vitamins, and 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		Fruit and vegetables provide you with vitamins, minerals and fibre. They can also help to fill you up if you're feeling hungry all the time.
Carbohydrates	Bread, rice, quinoa, millet, pasta, other wheat or grain products	They can be a good source of fibre and energy, and also help to satisfy your hunger.
	Sugars: sugar, honey, syrup, treacle, chocolate, cakes, sweets	These sweet foods can help to boost your energy levels.

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Extra vitamins and minerals

You may feel you should take extra vitamin pills or supplements to help you keep as healthy as possible. However, most doctors will tell you that if you're eating a healthy, balanced diet you don't need these extra vitamins. However, if you are 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 feel this may be the case for you, talk to your doctor or 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 if you are taking extra vitamins or supplements.

Nutritional supplement drinks

If you find it easiest to take most of your food in liquid form, you can buy nutritional supplement drinks in a variety of flavours from most supermarkets and chemists. You can also ask your doctor or dietician if you can get them on prescription.

Build Up, Complan and Recovery are examples of high-energy, high-protein powders that you can mix with either milk or water and serve hot or cold. You could 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. However, there is no clinical evidence that these claims are true. Talk to your doctor or dietician if you are at all anxious about your current diet.

If you're having trouble eating

"I just don't feel hungry anymore."

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

- Try eating small meals every 2-3 hours throughout the day. Keep snacks handy so that if you do suddenly feel like eating, you have something tempting to nibble on
- If your appetite is better at certain times of the 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
- Try to tempt yourself with foods that smell really good, like fresh bread, fried onions or roast chicken
- Try to avoid being around smells that put you off your food
- Don't feel you have to eat certain foods 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.

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"I'm losing too much weight."

Before you had cancer, you probably thought losing weight was a good thing. You may even have tried all kinds of weight-loss diets and programmes.

Now, however, you may be asked to eat foods that will help you to build up your weight and strength.

This may mean making some changes to how you, your family or friends prepare your meals to ensure that extra protein and energy are being added to your food.

- Choose full-fat foods whenever you can – so avoid anything labelled 'diet', 'lite', or 'low-fat'
- Add extra butter, margarine or oil to your meals. If appropriate, you could also add mayonnaise, salad cream, extra cheese, paneer, cream – in fact any fats or dairy products that go with what you're eating
- Eat bread with fatty spreads like peanut butter, chocolate spread, lemon curd, honey, jam or marmalade
- 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."

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 immediately before or 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. You may find it easier to eat light, bland meals
- Cold foods tend to smell less than hot foods, so try to eat things that taste better cold, such as ice cream, yoghurt, cereal, biscuits or salad
- Ginger or mint may help. Try ginger biscuits, ginger ale, peppermint sweets or herb teas that include peppermint or ginger
- Sucking sweets can help remove any bad taste in your mouth. 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.

"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 purée your food or try 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 like yoghurt, mousse or ice cream
- Avoid rough, chunky, salty, acidic or spicy foods like curry, chilli, crisps, peanut butter, oranges or vinegar.

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“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 increase your risk of getting oral thrush.

- Ask your doctor or nurse for medicine, pastilles or artificial saliva, and for a mouthwash to help prevent thrush
- Sip cool drinks or suck ice cubes regularly to keep your mouth moist. For a different taste, try freezing your favourite drinks as ice cubes
- 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 anymore.”

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

- Talk to your doctor or nurse and ask their advice
- If this feeling comes and goes, take advantage of the times when you are enjoying the taste of some, or all, foods and eat 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
- If you’ve gone off savoury foods altogether, eat more fruit and desserts
- If you have an unpleasant taste in your mouth all the time, try sucking strong sweets or mints.

“Normal food gives me diarrhoea.”

This could be due to your treatment or your cancer. 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. Try eating 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.

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"I keep getting constipated."

Once again, this could be caused by either the cancer or your treatment, particularly if you are 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.

Further information and recipes

There are several publications available about diet and eating when you are having treatment for cancer. Some of these include recipes. Ask your dietician which booklets would be suitable for you.

Do you have more questions, or need some help?

CLIC Sargent has been working with young people for over 20 years, and we understand what you're going through. Our care professionals include social workers, youth support workers and nurses, who provide clinical, practical and emotional support. Talk to your CLIC Sargent care professional, or call us on **0300 330 0803*** and we'll put you in touch with someone who can help.

You can also visit our website at www.clicsargent.org.uk or email us on info@clicsargent.org.uk.

* Calls to 03 numbers are charged in the same way as calls to a geographic (01 or 02) number. Check your phone contract to see how much you pay for this type of call - it may be included in 'inclusive minutes'.

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