

Eating Well during Treatment



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Eating well is a key part of good cancer treatment. But that is not always as easy as it sounds.

Cancer and cancer treatments may change your need and desire to eat. They can also change how your body reacts to certain foods and how it uses nutrients. When you are feeling well, eating enough food to get what your body needs is not a problem. But during cancer treatment, this may be hard to do if you have side effects or just don't feel well. As a result, your diet may need to be changed to help you build up the strength to withstand the effects of your cancer and its treatment.

Diets for people with cancer often focus on eating foods that are high in calories and protein, such as milk, cheese, and cooked eggs. If you lose weight while you are being treated, you may be told to add more butter or oil to your food to boost calories. You may also be told to eat fewer foods high in fiber. These can cause you to feel too full (and make you eat less) or cause diarrhea.

The diet that is best for you may not be the same for others with cancer. Your health care team can help you know what your body needs and plan ways to help you get what you need. Eating well while getting cancer treatment can help you:

- Feel better.
- Stay strong.
- Keep up your weight and your body's store of nutrients.
- Withstand side effects of treatment.
- Lower your risk of infection.
- Heal and recover quickly.

Eating well means eating all kinds of foods that have the nutrients you need to stay healthy while fighting cancer. These include protein, carbohydrates (carbs), fat, water, vitamins, and minerals.

Protein helps to repair body tissue and maintain a healthy immune system. Without enough protein, the body takes longer to get over an illness and to fight infections. People with cancer often need more protein than usual. Good sources include lean meat, fish, chicken, dairy products like cheese and milk, nuts, dried or sprouted beans, pulses, lentils, and soya foods.

Carbs and fats give the body most of the calories it needs. The number of calories each person needs depends on his or her age, size, and activity level. Carbs come from fruits, vegetables, breads (roti, naan, pita), noodles, grains and cereal products (appam, dosa, idli, sambhar), dried beans, peas, and lentils. Fats come from butter, oils, nuts, seeds, and the fat in meats, fish, chicken, and turkey.

Vitamins and minerals are needed for proper healing. A person who eats a balanced diet usually gets plenty of vitamins and minerals. But it can be hard to eat a balanced diet when you are being treated for cancer. If that is the case, your doctor or dietitian may suggest you take a daily multi-vitamin and mineral pill. Many people take vitamins and herbs on their own. If you do, be sure your health care team knows what you are taking.

Water and fluids are vital to health. If you do not take in enough fluids – or if you are losing fluids by throwing up or diarrhea – you can become ill very quickly. Fruit juices, lemon juice, coconut water, buttermilk and lassi are examples of fluids. These also give you calories. Ask your doctor or nurse how much fluid you need each day to offset any you may have lost through sweating, diarrhea, or throwing up.

Guidelines for eating well

The guidelines below let you know what kind of foods, and how much, a healthy person should eat each day. But remember, people with cancer may have different needs, especially during treatment. People having trouble eating during treatment may need to cut down on vegetables, fruits, and grains that contain a lot of fiber. Foods higher in fat and calories might be a better choice at this time. Talk to your doctor or dietitian about your specific needs. Unless your needs are different, you may want to follow the healthy eating guidelines below:

- Eat 5 or more servings of vegetables and fruits each day.
- Choose whole grains instead of processed (refined) grains and sugars.
- Limit the amount of high-fat or processed red meats that you eat.
- Choose foods that help you keep a healthy weight.

Plan ahead: Tips for healthy eating

- Stock up on foods you like so that you won't need to shop as often. Include foods you know you can eat even when you are sick.
- Keep up your strength and energy level and feel better with healthy snacks. Try to keep high-protein snacks on hand that are easy to make and eat. These include yogurt, cereal and milk, half a sandwich, and a bowl of hearty soup.
- Cook food in advance and freeze in meal-sized portions.
- Ask your friends and family if they can help with your shopping and cooking. They may even completely take over those jobs for you.
- Talk to your doctor, nurse, or dietitian about any concerns you have about eating well.
- Patients with other medical conditions like diabetes and heart disease must make adjustments in their diet (less sugar/fewer sweets, less salt, and fewer fatty foods) after discussing with their specialist.

For more information, please visit www.cancer.org.