

Physical Concerns – Nutrition and Food Concerns

Internet version of this handout with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/nutrition>

People with cancer need to maintain a healthy body weight and eat nutritious foods. Sometimes the side effects of surgery, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, and chemotherapy may cause a person to eat less and lose weight. And some treatments may cause weight gain. As a cancer patient you should try to be eating healthier foods, find safe and effective ways to add physical activity to your life, stop tobacco use, limit the amount of alcohol you drink and find positive ways to manage stress. *This is called symptom management or palliative care. Talk with your health care team about any symptoms you experience and any change in symptoms.*

Nutrition Guidelines During Cancer Treatment

- **Maintain a healthy weight.** For people who are overweight, this may mean losing weight but may also mean avoiding weight loss by getting enough calories every day. Ask your health care team for your healthy weight goal.
- **Get essential nutrients.** These include protein, carbohydrates, fats, and water.
- **Be as active as you can.** For example, take a daily walk. If you sit or sleep too much, you may lose muscle mass and increase your body fat, even if you are not gaining weight.
- **Ways to get essential nutrients and manage a healthy weight**
 - Experts recommend eating plant-based foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and plant-based proteins such as nuts, beans and tofu. Lean protein (in moderation) and low-fat dairy products are also recommended. Avoid highly processed foods and red meats as much as possible. Learn more about the effect of diet and nutrition during and after treatment.
 - Nutrition counseling with a registered dietitian (RD) or a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN), can help people with cancer get essential nutrients, such as protein, vitamins, and minerals. It can also help them maintain a healthy body weight. Ask your health care team to help you find one of these professionals. You

can also find a dietitian through the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Side Effects and Nutrition

Cancer treatment often causes side effects, such as nausea, mouth sores, and taste changes. These side effects may make it difficult to eat or drink. Follow these tips to help get the nutrition you need:

- If water tastes unpleasant to you, take in more liquid through foods and other drinks. For example, eat soup or watermelon and drink tea, milk, or milk substitutes. A sports drink is a great alternative. Consider flavoring water by adding fresh cut fruit.
- If food tastes bland, try seasoning it with flavorful spices. For example, try using lemon, garlic, cayenne, dill, and rosemary. If your mouth is sore, you may need to choose non-acidic and non-spicy foods until it heals.
- Eat 6 small meals throughout the day instead of 3 large meals. Make sure you reach your calorie goal with these smaller meals.
- If meat is no longer appealing, get protein from other foods. For example, try fish, eggs, cheese, beans, nuts, nut butters, tofu, or high-protein smoothies or shakes.
- If you have a metallic taste in your mouth, suck on mints, chew gum, or try fresh citrus fruits. Use plastic utensils and cook in nonmetal pots and pans. Also, try brushing your teeth before eating.
- If you have mouth sores or a gum infection, use a blender or food processor to make the texture of vegetables and meats smooth. For added smoothness and more calories, add butter, mild sauces, gravy, or cream. Try juicing or making smoothies because the extra moisture can help soothe a sore mouth.
- Some side effects are often treated with medication. If your side effects are affecting your hydration and nutrition, talk with your health care team.

Adapted from: <https://www.cancer.net/survivorship/healthy-living/nutrition-recommendations-during-and-after-treatment>

Resources for Additional Information:

- [American Cancer Society Nutrition Information](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Nutrition Recommendations During and After Treatment](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Food Safety During and After Cancer Treatment](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Food and Cancer Risk](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Food to Avoid During Cancer Treatment](#)
- [ASCO Answers, Food Safety & Cancer Treatment](#)
- [NIH, NCI, Nutrition in Cancer Care \(PDQ®\)](#)
- [American Institute for Cancer Research, Diet – What to Eat for Lower Cancer Risk](#)
- [CancerCare.org, The Importance of Nutrition During Treatment](#)

Información Española

- [American Cancer Society, Nutrición para la persona con cáncer durante su tratamiento](#)
- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, La nutrición en el tratamiento del cáncer \(PDQ®\)](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Recomendaciones sobre nutrición durante y después del tratamiento](#)