

Common Nutritional Problems and Cancer

Practical tips and support for people undergoing cancer treatment

Issued by: _____

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Introduction

This booklet is designed to give you information on ways to help manage common nutritional problems that are often encountered with cancer. These problems may be related to the disease itself or may be related to the side effects of a specific treatment.

Practical tips and ideas are provided to assist you in overcoming any nutritional problems that may arise during treatment and recovery. However, trial and error is often found to be a good approach.

You may find that you require further specific dietary advice and support, in which case your nurse specialist or doctor may consider referring you to the Macmillan Specialist Dietitians.

Good nutrition is important for:

- ✓ Maintaining well-being
- ✓ Improving your body's ability to fight infection
- ✓ Coping better with some of the side effects of treatment
- ✓ Maintaining a healthy weight or regaining lost weight

The common forms of treatment for cancer are surgery, radiotherapy and systemic anti-cancer therapy (SACT) – which includes chemotherapy, immunotherapy and targeted therapies.

Some of the nutritional problems or side effects that you may experience with cancer treatment are listed overleaf. These will vary according to the type of treatment you are having. Not all individuals will experience all of these side effects and they may come and go at different stages of your cancer journey.

Common nutritional side effects of cancer treatment:

Surgery

Altered food intake may be because of:

- Fasting for surgery
- Decreased intake after surgery

Radiotherapy

Problems are specifically related to the area being treated:

Head and neck region:

- Sore throat or mouth
- Dry or coated mouth
- Altered taste

Abdomen or pelvis:

- Nausea
- Change of bowel habit

Chemotherapy

Common problems include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Sore mouth
- Diarrhoea and / or constipation
- Altered taste
- Loss of appetite

Common nutritional problems and cancer

- ❖ **Fatigue**
- ❖ **Poor appetite**
- ❖ **Feeling sick**
- ❖ **Swallowing difficulties**
- ❖ **Dry mouth**
- ❖ **Sore mouth**
- ❖ **Taste changes**
- ❖ **Feeling full too quickly**
- ❖ **Diarrhoea**
- ❖ **Constipation**

Fatigue

We don't really know why cancer and its treatment causes fatigue. However, it can be made worse if your body doesn't get enough food, or if there are changes to the way the body is able to use the nutrients contained in food.

This can happen because:

- You do not feel like eating
- Your body needs more energy than before
- Your body may not be able to absorb and use all the nutrients from food

What can I do?

- ✓ Planning ahead, pacing yourself and listening to your body may help you to manage fatigue and prevent any unintentional weight loss that may result.
- ✓ Accept offers of help with food shopping and cooking from friends and relatives.

- ✓ There may be times of the day when you feel more like eating. Take advantage of this by eating well at these times.

What can I eat?

- ✓ If you do not feel able to prepare a meal, have a range of ready meals, convenience foods and snacks in your cupboard / freezer.
- ✓ Drinking a nourishing drink may be easier than eating a meal.
- ✓ The *Eating Well with a Small Appetite* resource (CISS-25) has some recipe ideas: <https://www.buckshealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/nutrition-and-dietetics/macmillan-dietitians/> - find under 'Nutrition Advice for Cancer Patients' or ask the Cancer Information, Wellbeing & Support Service for a copy of this resource.

Poor appetite

This is a frequent side effect of cancer and treatment. You may not feel hungry, but your body still needs nourishment.

What can I do?

- ✓ Try to keep a regular meal pattern. Small, frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours during the day may be more manageable than the traditional three meals a day.
- ✓ Avoid filling up too much on fluid before a meal.
- ✓ Take a short walk outside in the fresh air which may help to stimulate your appetite before a meal.
- ✓ Make the most of times when you do feel hungry and keep convenient snacks to hand.

What can I eat?

- ✓ If you are losing weight, try to include more sources of protein and calories (energy) in your diet. Good sources of protein and calories include meat, fish, milk and dairy products, eggs, pulses (peas, beans, lentils) and nuts.
- ✓ Fortifying foods is a good way to get extra calories (energy) into your diet without necessarily having to eat more food. Add butter, cream, cheese, or oil when preparing meals. See the *Eating Well with a Small Appetite* resource (CISS-25) for more practical advice. <https://www.buckshealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/nutrition-and-dietetics/macmillan-dietitians/> – find under 'Nutrition Advice for Cancer Patients' or ask the Cancer Information, Wellbeing & Support Service for a copy of this resource.

- ✓ Drinking a nourishing drink may be easier than eating a meal. See the *Eating Well with a Small Appetite* resource (CISS-25) for recipe ideas. <https://www.buckshealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/nutrition-and-dietetics/macmillan-dietitians/> – find under ‘Nutrition Advice for Cancer Patients’ or ask the Cancer Information, Wellbeing & Support Service for a copy of this resource.

Feeling sick

Sometimes chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment can make you feel sick. This is usually temporary, but it may make eating difficult.

What can I do?

- ✓ A variety of anti-sickness medications (antiemetics) are available. Ask your doctor or nurse which one would be suitable for you.
- ✓ Avoid eating directly before treatment if this makes the nausea worse.
- ✓ Try to avoid strong smells which may make nausea worse. Ask someone else to do the cooking where possible if cooking smells are making you feel sick.
- ✓ Try getting some fresh air before eating or sit by an open window whilst eating.
- ✓ Avoid going for long periods without food – you may find that nibbling frequently on snacks or light meals helps to keep the sickness under control.
- ✓ Avoid wearing tight fitting clothes, eat slowly in an upright position, and don't lie down immediately afterwards.

What can I eat?

- ✓ Avoid cooking smells - cold foods usually smell less than hot ones.
- ✓ Avoid foods that may make you feel worse e.g. greasy / fried foods, foods with a strong smell.
- ✓ Try salty foods – crisps, crackers or savoury biscuits or bland foods – chicken, toast, plain cake or biscuits.
- ✓ Ginger flavoured food or drinks may help to reduce feelings of sickness (e.g. ginger ale, ginger biscuits, ginger tea).
- ✓ Try sucking on mints or boiled sweets.

If you are being sick:

- ✓ It is important that you keep drinking plenty of fluids. Try cold, clear fluids (e.g. squash, fruit juice) and aim for 10-12 drinks each day to replace lost fluids.
- ✓ You may find it easier to sip drinks through a straw.
- ✓ As the sickness settles, start to include nourishing milky drinks and soups, gradually moving on to light meals and snacks again.

Swallowing difficulties

This may occur if you are having radiotherapy to the mouth and throat area.

What can I do?

- ✓ Ensure good oral hygiene with a soft toothbrush.
- ✓ Keep your mouth clean with regular alcohol-free mouthwashes.
- ✓ Avoid extreme temperatures i.e. very hot or cold foods or drinks.

What can I eat or drink?

- ✓ Concentrate on soft, moist foods:
Savoury - creamy soups, tender stews, casseroles or tagines of meat chicken, Quorn or tofu, cottage pie with extra gravy, fish with extra sauce
Sweet - milky puddings, sponge pudding with custard, mousses, crème caramel, milk jellies, porridge or other soft cereals.
- ✓ Drink plenty of nourishing drinks between meals.

NB. If you are only able to swallow liquids, please ask for a referral to the Macmillan Specialist Dietitian.

Dry mouth

A dry mouth can result from radiotherapy to the head or neck area or from chemotherapy as saliva may be reduced or become thicker. When your mouth is dry you are at increased risk of getting infections such as oral (mouth) thrush and tooth decay which will make eating more difficult.

What can I do?

- ✓ Ask your doctor or nurse about mouthwashes and medication that may reduce the chance of you getting oral (mouth) thrush. Artificial saliva and pastilles are available and may provide relief for a dry mouth.

For further information, refer to *Mouth Care for Patients Undergoing Cancer Treatment (CISS-136)*. <https://www.buckshealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/nutrition-and-dietetics/macmillan-dietitians/> – find under ‘Nutrition Advice for Cancer Patients’ or ask the Cancer Information, Wellbeing & Support Service for a copy of this resource.

What can I eat or drink?

- ✓ Sip cool drinks frequently to help moisten your mouth.
- ✓ Fizzy drinks can be used to make your mouth feel fresher.
- ✓ Suck ice cubes, ice lollies, or boiled sweets.
- ✓ Pineapple chunks can often be refreshing and can increase saliva production.
- ✓ Choose soft, moist foods that have extra sauces, gravy, custard or syrup added to them.

- ✓ Avoid sticky, chewy and dry foods such as bread, cold meat and chocolate that may make symptoms worse.

Sore mouth

Chemotherapy and radiotherapy can cause a sore mouth or throat. This problem can be made worse by infections (e.g. oral thrush) or by problems with your teeth or dentures.

What can I do?

- ✓ Ensure you maintain good mouth hygiene and speak to your doctor or nurse who can prescribe medication to alleviate symptoms of a sore mouth.

For further information, refer to *Mouthcare for Patients Undergoing Cancer Treatment* (CISS-136). <https://www.buckshealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/nutrition-and-dietetics/macmillan-dietitians/> – find under ‘Nutrition Advice for Cancer Patients’ or ask the Cancer Information, Wellbeing & Support Service for a copy of this resource.

What can I eat and drink?

- ✓ Choose soft, moist foods that have extra sauces, gravy, custard or syrup added to them.
- ✓ Drink plenty of nourishing drinks. Refer to *Eating Well with a Small Appetite* (CISS-25) for recipe ideas.
- ✓ Avoid the following as these may hurt or irritate a sore mouth:
 - Salty or spicy foods.
 - Acid fruits and juices including orange, grapefruit, lemon, lime, tomato and also vinegar.
 - Coarse or dry foods such as crisps, toast and dry biscuits.
 - Alcohol – wine and spirits in particular will irritate a sore mouth.
 - Drinks that are very hot or cold – try warm or cool drinks instead.

Taste changes

There are many reasons why your sense of taste may have changed – it may be due to treatment, medication or the cancer itself. If you have a dry mouth this may cause taste changes as well.

Some common complaints are that – ‘*all food tastes the same*’, ‘*food is like cardboard*’, ‘*food has a metallic taste*’, ‘*I no longer like the taste of my favourite food*’.

What can I do?

Keep your mouth fresh and clean with good mouthcare and by drinking plenty of fluids. Ask your doctor or nurse specialist about mouth care, especially if your mouth feels coated or your saliva seems thicker than normal.

For further information, refer to *Mouthcare for Patients Undergoing Cancer Treatment* (CISS-136). <https://www.buckshealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/nutrition-and-dietetics/macmillan-dietitians/> – find under ‘Nutrition Advice for Cancer Patients’ or ask the Cancer Information, Wellbeing & Support Service for a copy of this resource.

If food / drinks taste unpleasant:

- ✓ If tea or coffee tastes unpleasant, consider replacing these with fruit squash or hot Bovril, Oxo or Marmite.
- ✓ Drinking more fluids e.g. lemon tea, lemonade, fruit juice, ginger ale can remove unpleasant tastes in the mouth. Try using a straw and position it at the back of the mouth to bypass the taste buds.
- ✓ Herbs, spices, tomato sauce, brown sauce, chutney etc. can often disguise unpleasant tastes (be careful with too many spices if your mouth is sore).
- ✓ If you have a metallic taste in your mouth, try sucking on mints / chewing on sugar-free chewing gum, eating salty food or using plastic cutlery to help overcome it.

If unpleasant taste changes persist for several months:

Concentrate on the foods you can enjoy the most, even if they are different from your usual favourite dishes. Present food nicely so that you can still enjoy the look and smell of your meals.

If you are avoiding a lot of foods and are struggling to maintain a healthy weight, ask to see a Macmillan Specialist Dietitian for further advice.

If everything tastes bland:

- ✓ Try putting different temperature foods together e.g. fruit crumble and ice cream or different textures together e.g. cottage pie and crisps or yoghurt with granola
- ✓ If red meat tastes unpleasant, try blander protein sources e.g. fish, chicken, turkey, eggs or dairy products (milk, cheese, yoghurt). Pulses (peas, beans and lentils) can also be useful.
- ✓ Try sharp and strong flavours e.g. bitter jams, strong cheeses.
- ✓ Try salty foods e.g. crisps, bacon, ham and crackers.
- ✓ Try adding meat extracts such as Oxo, Bovril or Marmite to meat dishes for extra taste (be careful if your mouth is sore).
- ✓ Sharp flavoured or fizzy drinks may stimulate your taste buds
- ✓ Fresh fruit and boiled sweets can be refreshing.

Trial and error may be the answer, keep trying. Go along with your food cravings and enjoy the foods you can manage.

For more in depth information about managing taste changes, please ask for Patient Advice Sheet CISS-162. <https://www.buckshealthcare.nhs.uk/our-services/nutrition-and-dietetics/macmillan-dietitians/> – find under ‘Nutrition Advice for Cancer Patients’ or ask the Cancer Information, Wellbeing & Support Service for a copy of this resource.

Feeling full too quickly

It is quite common to feel full even after small amounts of food and this can be very uncomfortable.

What can I do?

There are medicines that can help your stomach empty faster – ask your doctor or nurse if they would be suitable for you. Try to avoid getting constipated, as this can make your symptoms worse.

What can I eat?

- ✓ Graze on small, frequent snacks and drinks rather than attempting large meals.
- ✓ Some people find it helpful to leave a gap between their main course and pudding.
- ✓ Choose high calorie (energy) foods or fortify your food with added butter, cream, cheese or oil when preparing meals. Refer to the *Eating Well with a Small Appetite* resource (CISS-25) for more practical advice.
- ✓ Take liquids between meals and avoid drinking too much fluid before you eat as this will make you feel full more quickly.
- ✓ Try to relax when eating, eat slowly and chew foods well.
- ✓ Sit up straight at mealtimes and avoid wearing tight clothing.
- ✓ Avoid lying down straight after eating. You may find a short walk after a meal may help you feel more comfortable.

NB. Trapped wind can make you feel very full and bloated. Try to avoid fizzy drinks, cabbage, onions, pickles and any other items you know make your symptoms worse. Some people find peppermint tea or cordial is helpful for clearing trapped wind.

Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea can be due to a number of different factors including treatment, medications or anxiety. Whatever the cause of diarrhoea, a temporary change in diet may help alleviate symptoms.

What can I do?

Talk to your doctor or nurse about the likely cause of your diarrhoea and whether medication might help.

What can I eat and drink?

- ✓ Eat little and often. Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Aim for 10-12 glasses of fluid per day - remember milk, milkshakes, fruit juice, soups, custard and jelly all count, as well as water. Limit alcohol, strong tea and coffee.

- ✓ It may help to cut down your fibre intake by replacing wholemeal bread and cereals with white varieties; avoid fruit and vegetables with skins, pips and seeds while you have diarrhoea and build the fibre back up slowly into your diet as your symptoms improve.
- ✓ Sometimes diarrhoea can cause **temporary lactose intolerance**. You may find it helpful to change to calcium-fortified soya milk or low lactose milk until diarrhoea is resolved.

Constipation

Constipation may be due to disease, treatment or medication (especially painkillers). If you are very constipated you may feel full and suffer from nausea or sickness.

What can I do?

Talk to your doctor or nurse about suitable laxative medication.

What can I eat and drink?

- ✓ Drink plenty of fluids (at least 10-12 glasses of fluid each day - remember milk, milkshakes, fruit juice, soups, custard and jelly all count, as well as water).
- ✓ Try to take some gentle exercise which may help alleviate constipation.
- ✓ The advice for constipation is often to increase your intake of dietary fibre, although this may not have the desired effect if your constipation is not diet related. Speak to your doctor or nurse to see if increasing the fibre in your diet will be of any benefit.

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I take a vitamin & mineral supplement?

If you are struggling with a poor appetite or reduced food intake, you may not be getting all the nutrients you need from your diet and may benefit from taking a multivitamin & mineral supplement.

Choose a product that has approximately 100% RNI (Reference Nutrient Intake) for all nutrients. Suitable options include Sanatogen, Superdrug, Boots or supermarket own brand A-Z multivitamin & mineral supplements. If you struggle to take whole tablets, a chewable option is Centrum Fruity Chewables or Superdrug chewable A-Z.

Warning: high dose vitamin & mineral supplements are not recommended as they may interact with your cancer treatment. If you have any queries about other supplements or food additives, please discuss with your health care professional.

Vitamin D

It is difficult to get enough vitamin D from diet alone - the main source of the vitamin is skin exposure to sunlight. All adults should consider taking 10 mcg /day during the winter months. Some 'at risk' groups (e.g. over 65's, people who cover their skin when outside) should consider taking a daily supplement of 10 mcg /day all year round.

Is it safe to take probiotics?

The 'beneficial' bacteria found in certain food products or supplements may benefit our health by improving the types of bacteria in our gut (bowel). However, if your immune system is not working properly or if you are on chemotherapy, you should not take them until 14 days after completion of treatment. There is not yet enough evidence to support taking probiotics during immunotherapy treatment.

Should I be following an alternative diet for treating my cancer?

There are several alternative diets claiming to treat or cure cancer. Some of these diets recommend avoiding certain foods or taking large doses of vitamins and minerals. There is no scientific evidence that these diets can make the cancer shrink, cure the disease or reduce recurrence. These diets are potentially harmful because they are often low in energy (calories) and protein and they tend to be high in fibre, making them very filling. They can cause weight loss and potentially serious nutritional deficiencies in people who are already experiencing problems eating due to their cancer treatment. If you are thinking of following an alternative diet, please discuss it with your consultant, nurse specialist or specialist dietitian.

If you have ongoing problems with a poor appetite and unintentional weight loss, ask your doctor or nurse to be referred to the Macmillan Specialist Dietitians.

Further Recommended Resources

- **Thames Valley Cancer Alliance Health & Wellbeing – includes useful video resources on managing fatigue and taste changes:**
https://thamesvalleycanceralliance.nhs.uk/our-work/patient-engagement-patient-experience/health-and-wellbeing/?utm_source=FL&utm_medium=FL02&utm_campaign=HWBJan22
- **Royal Surrey Diet & Cancer videos – includes useful video resources on managing side effects of treatment as well as some diet & cancer myth busting:**
<https://www.royalsurrey.nhs.uk/dietandcancervideos>

Notes recommended by your Healthcare Professional:

Free Prescriptions

All cancer patients undergoing treatment for cancer, the effects of cancer or the effects of cancer treatment can apply for an exemption certificate for a free prescription from their GP.

How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?

Infection prevention & control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection prevention & control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. We ask that you, and anyone visiting you, use the hand sanitiser available at the entrance to every ward before coming in to and after leaving the ward. In some situations, hands may need to be washed at the sink using soap and water rather than using the hand sanitiser as hand sanitisers are not suitable for use when dealing with patients who have symptoms of diarrhoea.

Please remember that this leaflet is intended as general information only. We aim to make the information as up to date and accurate as possible, but please note that it is subject to change. Please therefore always check specific advice on any concerns you may have with your doctor.

If you need advice or further assistance, please contact our patient advice and liaison service (PALS): call 01296 316042 or email bht.pals@nhs.net