

Eating well during cancer treatment

Practical tips and support for patients and carers

Issued by: _____

Contact details: _____ Date: _____

Introduction

The information in this leaflet is for you if you:

- Are currently having cancer treatment
- Will soon be starting cancer treatment

Why is it important to eat well during cancer treatment?

Cancer treatments disrupt the way cancer cells grow and divide but they can also affect normal cells. This can cause you to feel unwell. It is therefore important for you to aim to have a healthy, balanced diet during your treatment, to keep you as well as possible.

Why is it important to keep a stable weight during cancer treatment?

Research has shown that people who maintain a stable weight through cancer treatment live longer and have a better quality of life. It is therefore important to try not to lose weight during your cancer treatment.

If you lose weight during treatment:

- You are more likely to lose muscle than fat. This puts you at risk of poor mobility and may reduce your ability to do things that you enjoy
- You may be more at risk of side effects, and your treatment may have to be delayed if you are not well enough

Read more about what you should eat if you are losing weight or struggling to eat well in the section on '**Losing weight / poor appetite during cancer treatment**'.

Note: If you are on long term hormonal treatment and are gaining weight, it may be appropriate to try to lose some weight. See below for the section on '**What should I do if I am gaining weight during my cancer treatment?**'. If you are not sure if this is relevant to you, please discuss it with your Health Care Professional (HCP).

When should I follow a healthy eating diet?

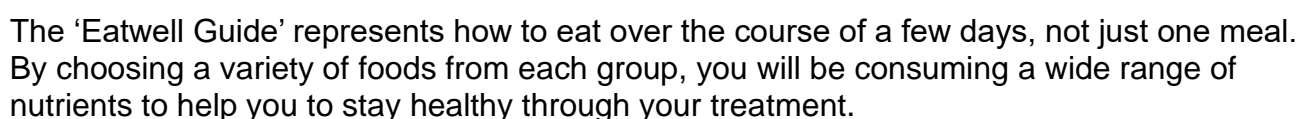
You should follow a healthy eating diet if:

- You are coping well with treatment
- You are not suffering with side effects or symptoms that are affecting your food intake
- You have not lost weight
- You have gained weight during treatment

If you are managing well with your cancer treatment, are not having problems with eating and do not have a poor appetite, you should aim to have a healthy, balanced diet and keep your weight stable.

- Fruit and vegetables
- Starchy foods (carbohydrates) e.g. wholegrain bread, pasta, rice and cereals
- Protein - rich foods e.g. beans, pulses, fish, lean meat and eggs
- Dairy foods & alternatives e.g. calcium fortified soya products
- Good quality fats from vegetable sources e.g. olive and rapeseed oil, nuts and seeds

The diagram below is called the 'Eatwell Guide'. It shows the recommended proportions to include in your diet for each of the different food groups.



Important tips for a healthy lifestyle:

- **Eat at least 5 portions of different fruit and vegetables each day.** 1 portion is equivalent to approximately 80g fruit or vegetables. Fruit juices and smoothies only count as a maximum of 1 portion per day due to their high 'free' sugar content and reduced fibre content.
- **Include starchy carbohydrates in each meal** e.g. rice, bread, pasta, potatoes. Try to choose wholegrain options where possible as these are a good source of fibre.
- **Include protein in your diet** e.g. pulses, fish, eggs, meat, poultry and vegetarian alternatives (e.g. tofu, Quorn®).
- **Try to increase the amount of pulses (beans, peas and lentils) in your diet.** They are high in fibre and protein, as well as vitamins and minerals. These provide a good alternative to meat as they are low in fat.
- **Have 2 portions of fish per week, one of which should be oily** (e.g. salmon, mackerel, herring, tuna steak).
- **Include dairy or dairy alternatives** (e.g. soya products or other plant based dairy alternatives, fish with bones) which provide calcium and other important vitamins and minerals.
- **Choose unsaturated (vegetable) oils and spreads** such as olive or rapeseed oils, avocado, nuts and seeds. Consume these in small amounts as they are high in calories.
- **Only consume foods high in fat, salt and sugar in small amounts and as a treat.** No more than 5% of your total daily energy intake should come from added or 'free' sugars – this is equivalent to a maximum of 9 tsp sugar per day for men and 6 tsp sugar per day for women.
- **Drink approx 8 cups / glasses of fluid per day.** This can include water, low calorie squash, tea and coffee. Fruit juices should be limited to 150ml maximum per day due to the high 'free' sugar content. Avoid drinks containing added sugar such as high juice and non - diet versions of fizzy drinks.
- **Try to eat at regular mealtimes** as this can help you to avoid feeling very hungry, and overindulging or reaching for high fat / sugar items.
- **Try to save alcohol for celebrations rather than regular consumption.** Alcohol is high in calories and can lead to weight gain. It is also linked to an increased risk of some cancers. If you choose to drink, do not exceed 14 units of alcohol per week (for men and women) and try to have at least 2 alcohol free days per week.

- **Try to stay as active as possible during treatment.** Research has shown that moderate exercise during cancer treatment is safe and can have many benefits. Aim to be active for at least 150 minutes / week and sit less. Physical activity is anything that gets you moving – it doesn't have to mean going to the gym! There are some recommended Macmillan resources at the back of this leaflet which you may find helpful.

What should I do if I am gaining weight during my cancer treatment?

If you start to gain weight once your treatment starts, aim to follow a healthy, balanced diet. In addition to the advice on pages 2-4 you might find the following tips useful:

- Plan ahead. Avoid buying high calorie foods. If they are not in the house, you will not be so tempted!
- Watch portion sizes at mealtimes. Using a smaller plate may help.
- Fill half your plate with vegetables or salad at your main meal.
- Choose wholegrain varieties of starchy foods such as pasta, rice, and bread. These high fibre options contain more nutrients and will keep you full for longer, helping with weight management and blood - sugar control.
- Try to avoid snacks between meals. If you are hungry, choose healthy options such as a piece of fruit or small handful of plain, unsalted nuts.
- Stay active – move more and sit less. Aim to be active for at least 150 minutes / week. Physical activity is anything that gets you moving – it doesn't have to mean going to the gym! There are some recommended Macmillan resources at the back of this leaflet which you may find helpful.

What should I do if I am losing weight or struggling to eat well?

When you are having cancer treatment you should aim to stay a stable weight. If you are losing weight you may need to make some changes to your diet.

If your appetite is reduced during cancer treatment, please ask for a copy of the Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust (BHT) patient information leaflet ***'Eating well with a small appetite' (CISS- 25)***. This resource provides practical support and ideas to help you to increase the energy (calorie) and protein content of your diet, aiming to prevent weight loss and maintain your energy levels. There are practical tips on how to fortify foods as well as meal and snack options and recipes for homemade nourishing drinks.

If you are still losing weight after following this advice, ask your doctor or specialist nurse to refer you to the Macmillan Specialist Dietitians.

What can I do to manage symptoms that are affecting how I am eating?

There are a number of side effects of cancer treatment which may lead to nutritional problems, including:

- Tiredness / fatigue
- Poor appetite
- Feeling sick (nausea) & vomiting
- Swallowing difficulties
- Dry mouth
- Sore mouth / ulcers in the mouth
- Taste changes
- Feeling full too quickly
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation

If you are struggling with any of the above side effects of cancer treatment, please talk to your doctor or nurse specialist about the best way to manage your symptoms medically, and ask for a copy of the BHT patient information leaflet '**Common Nutritional Problems and Cancer**' (**CISS -24**). This resource provides practical advice and support about what you can do to manage each of these symptoms and tips on the best way to manage your diet when symptoms arise and for more in depth information about managing taste changes please ask for Patient Advice Sheet **CISS-162**.

For further information about managing a sore or dry mouth, ask for the BHT patient information leaflet '**Mouthcare for patients undergoing cancer treatment**' (**CISS – 136**).

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

Stress and anxiety around eating

Cancer treatment can be very stressful and frightening. You may find this puts you off eating and affects your eating habits.

Changes in your eating patterns may also cause you and those around you to feel anxious. Try not to put too much pressure on mealtimes. Make sure you have a calm, relaxed space to eat in. Some people find being distracted with the television, music, book or crossword helps them to eat more without realising.

It can be helpful to talk to a health care professional about how you are feeling about your cancer and treatment. The Cancer Information & Wellbeing Services has got Support Facilitators who are happy to listen and discuss with you how cancer is affecting your life. All cancer patients treated at BHT have access to Complementary Therapies within the Cancer Care & Haematology Unit (CCHU) at Stoke Mandeville Hospital. For more information about the services available, speak to one of the Support Facilitators or pick up a **Cancer Information & Wellbeing Services** patient advice sheet.

Food safety & Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy treatment reduces your ability to fight off infections and can make you more prone to illnesses such as food poisoning. It is important to follow food safety precautions when preparing, cooking and reheating foods. Your nurse specialist will provide you with a booklet called **'Food safety advice for people receiving SACT' (CISS -58)** before you start treatment.

Alternative Diets

There is a lot of attention in the media surrounding diets that claim to cure or control cancer. There is currently little robust scientific evidence that any of these diets can improve cancer survival or quality of life.

Some of these diets restrict whole food groups when there is very little evidence to support doing this. These diets are potentially harmful as they are often low in energy (calories) and protein, putting you at risk of nutritional deficiencies and weight loss, which may compromise your cancer treatment.

Alternative diets are therefore not recommended. If you are still keen to follow a particular diet, please discuss this with your doctor or nurse specialist and ask to see the Macmillan Dietitians who will support you and ensure your diet is nutritionally complete.

Vitamin & mineral supplements

Vitamin and mineral supplements can be helpful if you are struggling to maintain a balanced diet or have problems absorbing your food properly during cancer treatment. Your doctor may prescribe supplementation if they suspect you are lacking a particular vitamin or mineral.

Alternatively, a multivitamin & mineral supplement can be obtained over the counter at most pharmacies and supermarkets. Choose a product that has approximately 100% RNI (Reference Nutrient Intake) for all nutrients. Suitable options include Tesco A-Z (or other supermarket own brand A-Z), Sanatogen A-Z, Superdrug or Boots A-Z. If you struggle to take whole tablets, a chewable option is Centrum Fruity Chewables, to be taken twice daily or as an alternative 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

Most people are able to get all the nutrients they need from a balanced diet. The exception is Vitamin D. It is difficult to get enough 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.

Probiotics

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

What do I eat at the end of my cancer treatment?

Once you have completed your cancer treatment, if you have no problems with eating, it is advisable that you follow a healthy, balanced diet. This will help with your recovery and reduce your risk of a cancer recurrence. The World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) has lots of helpful lifestyle advice and tips for living healthily after cancer treatment (see link below).

If you continue to experience difficulties eating after you have completed treatment, follow the advice in the **'Eating well with a small appetite'** booklet until you are able to return to a healthy, balanced diet. If you are concerned about ongoing poor appetite or symptoms, please discuss this with your doctor or nurse specialist, who may refer you to the Macmillan Dietitians for further assessment and nutritional support.

Further reading / reference sources

- **British Dietetic Association** – www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/home
- **Cancer Research UK** – www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/diet-and-cancer
- **Drink Aware** – www.drinkaware.co.uk/
- **Be Healthy Bucks** – <https://bhb.maximusuk.co.uk/> or 03332 300177
- **Macmillan Cancer Support** – <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/healthy-eating-and-cancer>
- **Move More:** Your guide to becoming more active – Macmillan Resource with DVD available from the Cancer Care & Haematology Unit, Stoke Mandeville Hospital or online
- **NHS Choices** – www.nhs.uk/Livewell/goodfood/pages/the-eatwell-guide.aspx
- **World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF)** - <https://www.wcrf-uk.org/uk/health-advice-and-support/eat-well-during-cancer>

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.

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

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.