



# Eating well and cancer



# Why is it important for people with cancer to eat well?

If the person you care for has cancer, it is more important than ever that they eat well.

Unfortunately, it is often at these times that they may not be able to eat as much as they usually would, which can weaken the body further. It is important to eat enough, to make sure the body gets all the nutrients it needs.

Eating well can help a person with cancer:

- Maintain their weight
- Provide energy
- Cope with side effects from cancer treatment
- Tolerate the most beneficial dose of certain cancer treatments
- Fight infection and recover faster from surgery.

Overall, this can help people to cope better with the cancer journey.

As a carer, you want to do the best for the person you look after, including ensuring they eat well.

There are some simple ways that you can help a person to deal with the eating problems caused by cancer or its treatment.

This booklet is for anyone caring for a person with cancer and provides useful information and tips on how to help them eat well.

# How can cancer affect someone's diet?

Many people with cancer find it difficult to eat enough and can sometimes lose weight. There are many reasons for this; it can be as a result of the cancer itself or due to the side effects of the different treatments.

## Site of cancer

The site of cancer in the body can affect how well you are able to obtain nutrients from the food you eat. If the site of the tumour (cancer) is in the upper part of the digestive system (mouth, oesophagus/gullet or stomach) this may cause changes in your ability to eat 'normal' foods. If the tumour is in the lower part of the digestive system this may affect your body's ability to absorb and use nutrients to allow for normal function.

## Cancer treatment

In many cases, the treatment of cancer involves one or more of the following treatments:

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Surgery.

Although these methods are very powerful in the process of killing the cancer cells, some healthy cells are also damaged, especially those normally growing and dividing rapidly, such as those in the mouth, digestive tract, and hair. This is what causes cancer treatment side effects, such as nausea, changes in taste, upset bowels and pain. These **side effects** may cause eating problems that put some people off their food.

## Changes in the body's metabolism

In some types of cancer, the way the body uses nutrients can change. Tumours may produce chemicals that change the way the body uses or absorbs certain nutrients from food. The body's use of some nutrients may be affected, especially by tumours of the stomach or intestines. Therefore, although someone may appear to be eating enough, the body may not be able to absorb all the nutrients from the food. This can lead to cancer cachexia, which is a complex syndrome caused by a combination of a reduced food intake and changes in the body's metabolism.

Even if someone is not very active, the body may be using up more energy. So even if they are eating as much as they always have or even more than usual, they may still lose weight.

## Psychological and emotional factors

There are also many emotional reasons why someone may not eat as much during cancer treatment. Someone with cancer may be worried or anxious and struggling to cope with the related treatment. This can sometimes affect appetite and how much they feel like eating.



# Why is the person I look after losing weight?

**Up to 85% of those living with cancer will suffer some degree of weight loss**

Cancer patients can experience weight loss for lots of reasons; it can be due to the site of cancer itself or the side effects of different cancer treatments. If you are worried the person you care for is losing weight and struggling to eat, it is important to speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.

During and after cancer treatment, some people experience unpleasant side effects that can cause eating problems. This includes temporary changes in appetite, taste or smell, which can put people off their food. In some cases, a person with cancer may lose weight unintentionally.

## Side effects affecting eating and drinking can include:

Loss of appetite

Weight loss

Taste changes

Nausea and vomiting

Diarrhoea

Constipation

Dry mouth

Sore mouth and throat

Anxiety, low mood or depression

**Loss of appetite** is one of the most common problems caused by cancer and its treatment. The side effects of treatment itself can put a person off their food. Emotions such as stress and depression can also play a part and contribute to appetite loss.

Some people will experience **weight loss** during their cancer journey. This can be due to the location of the disease in the body, the side effects of different cancer treatments or a combination of these factors. Some types of cancer can affect the body's metabolism, making the body break down fat and muscle which can lead to weight loss. The side effects of treatment itself can cause nausea, vomiting or changes in taste that may put a person off their food.

Chemotherapy, radiotherapy, infections in the mouth, certain medications, and sometimes the cancer itself, may cause food and drinks to **taste different**. Foods may start to taste metallic, bitter or some foods will lose their taste.

**Nausea and vomiting** is a common side effect of cancer treatments, in particular chemotherapy. For some people, it can occur right after treatment, whilst others may experience it two or three days later, and others may never experience it at all. Nausea can also stop the person you care for from eating enough nutrients as it reduces appetite and may lead to weight loss if it is not properly controlled.

**Diarrhoea** refers to passing loose or watery stools more than four times a day. It could be caused by treatment, such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy to the prostate, bowel or gynaecological areas and surgery to the stomach, pancreas or bowel. Other causes of diarrhoea include infections, and sometimes medicines, including some antibiotics. With diarrhoea, foods and liquids pass through the bowel too quickly so that the body cannot absorb all of the nutrients and water from them, which can lead to a reduced appetite and weight loss.

**Constipation** may be a side effect of chemotherapy and certain medicines, such as pain-relieving drugs. It may also be caused by not drinking enough fluids or eating enough fibre in the diet, or by being less mobile. Being constipated may make the person you care for feel full and reduce appetite.

**Dry mouth** is often caused by chemotherapy or radiotherapy to the head and neck area, or by certain medications. Dry mouth may cause difficulty in wearing dentures as well as with chewing and swallowing food, and can also make it more difficult to taste and enjoy foods. It is important to ensure good oral hygiene, including regular dental check-ups, especially if the dry mouth continues long term.

**A sore mouth** can be caused by certain chemotherapy drugs, radiotherapy to the head or neck region or fungal infections in the mouth. This can make eating and drinking very uncomfortable and swallowing difficult.

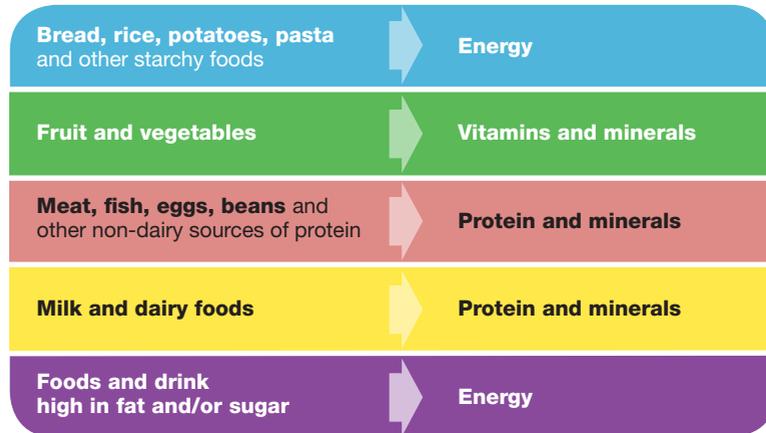
There are many **emotional reasons** why someone may not eat as much during cancer treatment. If you are living with a diagnosis of cancer you may be feeling worried, anxious and upset. This can affect appetite and how much is eaten.

As with any symptoms, make sure you talk to your GP or other healthcare professional for advice and support in managing these symptoms in the person you care for.

**For more information on eating well  
when living with cancer please visit  
[www.nutritionincancer.co.uk](http://www.nutritionincancer.co.uk)**

# Dealing with weight loss

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is vital for maintaining good health for us all. This includes eating foods from all the different food groups, to provide us with the nutrients we need.



However, if someone is living with cancer they may find it difficult to eat enough of certain food groups and if they are losing weight, the body will need extra energy and protein to help them prevent further weight loss.

# Tips for maintaining your weight



The following tips can help to increase energy and protein intake:

- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours
- Increase intake of foods that are high in calories and protein, for example: meat, fish, eggs, full fat dairy products (like yoghurt and cheese)
- Eating snacks such as biscuits, cakes, chocolate, nuts or crackers may be useful
- Add cream, butter, whole milk or honey to food to increase calorie and protein intake
- Avoid drinking fluids with meals, which may reduce how much is eaten
- Avoid foods that make any treatment-related side effects worse.

**You can read about more tips on coping with treatment-related side effects at [www.nutritionincancer.co.uk](http://www.nutritionincancer.co.uk)**

# What happens if food is not enough?

Eating a healthy, balanced diet plays a key role in keeping the body strong. Living with cancer can put a strain on the body. It can be hard to get enough food at these times, which can weaken the body further.

## What is medical nutrition?

Medical nutrition has been specifically designed for those who find it difficult to get adequate nutrition from a normal diet alone. Medical nutrition is a scientifically formulated liquid food that is available in the form of a drink containing energy, protein, vitamins and minerals. It is particularly helpful for those living with a medical condition, recovering from an illness or operation, or those who have become weak and frail over time.

## What are the different types of oral nutritional supplements available

Nutritional supplements are available in a variety of styles including milkshake, juice, soup and pudding style. There are different options available which can help you manage certain treatment-related side effects.

**High protein, high energy, low volume** milkshake style drinks are sometimes recommended for those living with cancer. These drinks can help make it easier to get the energy needed even if the person you care for has a small appetite. Many people find it difficult to finish large volumes of drinks when they have appetite loss. Oral nutritional supplement drinks that are low volume and ready to drink ensure people with appetite loss are able to get the calories and protein they need.

**Yogurt style** drinks can help those people with taste changes that may be caused as a side effect of cancer treatment.

**Juice style** drinks may also help manage a dry mouth that may be caused as a side effect of cancer treatment.

## Speak to your GP

If you are worried the person you are caring for is struggling with a normal diet, the practical tips within this leaflet can help improve nutritional intake with food. You could also ask your pharmacist whether an over the counter product in a powdered format, such as Complan, is a suitable option alongside normal foods and drinks. However, should the person you are caring for continue to struggle, please speak to your GP or other healthcare professional about your concerns and whether medical nutrition is right for them.

Further information can be found at [www.carersuk.org/nutrition](http://www.carersuk.org/nutrition), by calling the Nutricia helpline on 0845 250 101, or by visiting [www.nutritionincancer.co.uk](http://www.nutritionincancer.co.uk) for further hints and tips.



# About Carers UK

## Carers UK makes life better for carers

We're the UK's only national membership charity for carers.

We give expert advice, information and support.

We connect carers so no-one has to care alone.

We campaign together for lasting change.

We innovate to find new ways to reach and support carers.

Visit us at our website to join us, help us, or access more resources: **[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)**.

Call our advice line for expert information and advice about caring: **0808 808 7777** (open Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm)  
**[advice@carersuk.org](mailto:advice@carersuk.org)**.

# About Nutricia

Nutricia specialises in the delivery of advanced medical nutrition for all who need it, spanning from the very young to the elderly.

We supply high quality feeds, equipment and support services to patients and healthcare professionals. Through our Nutricia Homeward service we deliver feeds, feeding pumps, equipment and nursing care direct to patient's homes.

# Carers UK and Nutricia

Carers UK is working in partnership with Nutricia to help improve understanding about nutrition and caring. The partnership provides carers with information and resources on nutritional care for both themselves and the person they care for.

**Carers UK**

20 Great Dover Street  
London  
SE1 4LX

[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)

**Carers Northern Ireland**

58 Howard Street  
Belfast  
BT1 6JP

[www.carersni.org](http://www.carersni.org)

**Carers Scotland**

The Cottage  
21 Pearce Street  
Glasgow  
G51 3UT

[www.carersscotland.org](http://www.carersscotland.org)

**Carers Wales**

River House  
Ynys Bridge Court  
Cardiff  
CF15 9SS

[www.carerswales.org](http://www.carerswales.org)

**Nutricia Ltd**

White Horse Business Park  
Trowbridge, Wilts BA14 0XQ

[www.nutritionincancer.co.uk](http://www.nutritionincancer.co.uk)

Carers UK is a charity registered in England and Wales (246329) and in Scotland (SC039307) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (864097). Registered office 20 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4LX.

The information in this leaflet is for guidance only and is not an authoritative statement of the law. The information is correct as of February 2015.

SCC2649-03/15