

Eating Guidelines For After a Cancer Diagnosis

Eating well is an important part of your cancer self-care. Whether you just found out that you have cancer or you are preparing for or receiving cancer treatment, how you eat can affect your weight, strength, and energy. Good nutrition also promotes healing, supports immune function, and helps you feel your best.

This handout provides general information about nutrition after a cancer diagnosis. Cancer and treatment side effects can sometimes make eating difficult. If you are having problems eating or are losing weight, speak with a registered dietitian to develop a personalized plan.



Steps you can take

Choose a varied and well-balanced way of eating.

Choose a variety of foods that provide the calories, protein, vitamins and minerals you need to stay well-nourished. Foods can be chosen based on your preferences, tolerances, appetite, any cancer or treatment side effects, as well as any other health conditions you have. The most helpful foods for you may be different than another person's. This is normal as there is not a "cancer diet" or list of foods to eat or avoid because someone has cancer.

For more information on healthy eating, see Additional Resources.

Eat foods that help you maintain your weight.

Maintaining your weight is a good sign that you are getting the calories you need to support your health. You may need to choose foods that are higher in calories, eat larger amounts, or eat more often to get enough calories to prevent weight loss. Examples of higher calorie foods include avocados, higher fat dairy products (e.g. 2% M.F. or higher yogurt, cheese), margarine, oils, sauces, nuts and seeds, peanut or other nut butters, and dried fruit.

Include good sources of protein with meals and snacks.

Eating enough protein helps you stay strong and is important for healing and keeping your immune system healthy.

Sources of protein include fish, poultry, meat, eggs, legumes (beans, peas, and lentils), tofu, nuts and seeds, peanut butter or other nut butters, milk, fortified soy beverage, yogurt, cheese, and protein powders.

For more information on ways to increase calories and protein, see Additional Resources.

Choose foods that help manage symptoms.

There may be times when you need to change the types of foods you eat to manage symptoms and feel your best. For example, you may need to eat low fibre foods instead of high fibre foods if you have diarrhea or feel full quickly. If you are avoiding many foods or the variety in your diet is limited, speak with a dietitian to develop a plan that meets your needs.

Use these strategies to help you eat well.

- | Have easy-to-prepare nutritious foods available for days when you are too tired to cook. Quick foods include bread, peanut butter, eggs, granola, protein bars, muffins, canned and dried fruits, nuts and seeds, soups, canned fish, frozen meals, instant hot cereals, cold cereal, cheese, yogurt, pudding, or high-energy drinks like Ensure®.
- | When you can, make meals and freeze them for times when you don't feel like cooking.
- | Ask friends and family to shop and prepare some meals for you.
- | Try not to skip meals. If your appetite is smaller than normal, snack throughout the day. Eating small amounts more often (5 or 6 times a day) may be easier than eating full meals.
- | Use convenience meals and prepared items such as shredded cheese or use meal delivery services if cooking is difficult.

Drink 8 to 12 cups of fluid each day.

Water and other fluids such as tea, coffee, 100% fruit juice and broth count toward your total fluids. Choose nutritious fluids like milk or fortified soy beverage or make yogurt smoothies or milkshakes. Drinks like Ensure®, Boost®, or Nestle Breakfast Anytime® are also convenient and nutritious options especially if you have a poor appetite.

Use good food safety practices.

Some cancer treatments lower your body's ability to fight infection. During this time, you are at increased risk for food borne illness (also called food poisoning). To lower your risk, avoid eating the following:

- | raw or undercooked meat, poultry, fish, and seafood
- | raw eggs or eggs with runny yolks
- | uncooked soft cheeses
- | unpasteurized dairy products.

For more information on foods to avoid and safer options, see Additional Resources.

Be careful with dietary supplements such as vitamins, minerals, herbal supplements and other natural health products.

Dietary supplements are not needed simply because you have been diagnosed with cancer or are receiving cancer treatment. Taking supplements to boost your immune system is not recommended and may not be safe. There are concerns that some supplements may affect how cancer treatments work. Therefore, during cancer treatment, do not take antioxidant supplements such as beta-carotene, vitamins A, C, and E, and selenium. However, you can continue to eat food sources of these nutrients. Eating food is the best way to get the vitamins and minerals your body needs to be healthy.

When you cannot eat a well-balanced diet, taking a one-a-day regular-strength multiple vitamin and mineral supplement may be helpful. Speak with your health care provider before you take a vitamin, mineral or natural health product supplement if you are having cancer treatment.

Be cautious about specialized diets.

Diets like the macrobiotic, low acid/alkaline, or low carbohydrate/ketogenic diets haven't been shown to cure cancer or slow the growth of cancer in people. These diets can be very restrictive, which can make it difficult to get the calories and protein you need. If you are thinking about following a specialized diet that requires you avoid many foods or a food group, speak with a registered dietitian.



Additional Resources

These handouts were referred to above:

- | Cancer Prevention Eating Guidelines www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthy-eating/cancer-prevention-eating-guidelines
Following cancer prevention recommendations after a cancer diagnosis is recommended when you are able to eat well and are maintaining your weight.
- | Canada's Food Guide www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/canada-food-guides.html
This can also be used to plan a balanced meal pattern.
- | Eating Guidelines for Increasing Your Energy and Protein Intake
- | Food Choices for Increasing Your Protein Intake
- | Food Choices for Increasing Your Energy Intake
- | Food Safety for People with a Weakened Immune System
www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-safety-vulnerable-populations/food-safety-people-with-weakened-immune-system.html

You may also find these resources helpful:

- | Healthy Eating Guidelines For After A Breast Cancer Diagnosis
www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthy-eating/breast-cancer-diagnosis
- | Healthy Eating Guidelines For After A Prostate Cancer Diagnosis
www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthy-eating/prostate-cancer-diagnosis
- | Healthy Eating Guidelines For Cancer Survivors
www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthy-eating/cancer-survivors
- | Canadian Cancer Society www.cancer.ca
- | American Institute for Cancer Research www.aicr.org
- | BC Cancer Agency www.bccancer.bc.ca

These resources are provided as sources of additional information believed to be reliable and accurate at the time of publication and should not be considered an endorsement of any information, service, product or company.



Notes

Distributed by:

Dietitian Services at HealthLinkBC (formerly Dial-A-Dietitian), providing free nutrition information and resources for BC residents and health professionals. Go to www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthyeating or call 8-1-1 (anywhere in BC). Interpreters are available in over 130 languages.