5 Nutrition Questions Everyone in Cancer Treatment Should Ask

Medical nutrition therapy provided by a registered dietitian reduces the risk of malnutrition and improves outcomes during cancer treatment.

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Nearly 40% of men and women in the United States will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives. The cancer journey is a long and arduous one, and it can be difficult to assess gaps in your care because of how varied and personalized each treatment plan can be.

But what if one commonly overlooked component of cancer care could potentially speed up recovery, improve tolerance of treatment, reduce side effects, lower the risk of infection, decrease hospitalizations and more?

That component is nutrition.

Adequate nutrition status can be difficult to maintain for patients with cancer. In fact, it is estimated that up to 80% of patients will become malnourished at some point in their cancer journey. Malnutrition is an imbalance of the nutrients the body needs to thrive.

In cancer patients, malnutrition is triggered by the complex interaction between reduced food intake, increased energy expenditure from metabolic changes, systemic inflammation, tumor growth and the therapies used during treatment. Simply put, the body burns fuel more rapidly but struggles to take in enough micro- and macronutrients, creating a deficit. This deficit causes us to tap into our energy savings by breaking down fat and muscle.

To make matters more challenging, it's common for patients with cancer to need more calories to sustain their body weight and nutrition status than they did prior to their cancer diagnosis. It is estimated that 20% to 30% of deaths in patients with cancer are due to malnutrition and not the cancer itself.

Luckily, there is an answer. Medical nutrition therapy provided by a registered dietitian has been shown to reduce the risk of malnutrition and improve outcomes during cancer treatment. Nutrition intervention for patients with cancer may include dietary counseling, oral nutrition supplements, and, if necessary, enteral nutrition (via a tube to the stomach) and/or parenteral nutrition (intravenous or via a port). These interventions have been shown to improve weight, energy intake

and quality of life.

However, access to nutrition care during cancer treatment is sparse. In fact, over 75% of cancer centers do not have a registered dietitian on staff, and only about half monitor the nutrition status of patients with cancer. The focus during cancer treatment is shifted toward treatment regimens, and it can be easy to forget the simple fact that our bodies need nourishment to survive.

Here are some helpful questions to ask your care team about nutrition care at your next visit:

- I am interested in learning more about how to optimize my nutrition status to help with my cancer treatment. Is there a registered dietitian on staff that I can access to receive support and guidance? If a registered dietitian is not available through the center, is there one you could recommend who specializes in cancer?
- During my treatment, how will we monitor and correct my nutrition status and/or unintentional weight loss?
- What are the common treatment side effects, such as loss of appetite, dry mouth and diarrhea, that could make it more difficult for me to get adequate nutrition? Do you have any recommendations on how to minimize these side effects if they arise?
- Are there any dietary restrictions or modifications that I should be aware of during my treatment?
- What are the warning signs of malnutrition?

Cancer treatment can be overwhelming. Taking action to improve your nutrition can help ease the journey—and may improve both your outcome and quality of life.

Nutrimedy Inc., facilitates dietitians to provide personalized evidence-based clinical nutrition support to people with medical conditions, including cancer. This article was written by Karolina Starczak RDN, who is CEO; Mallory Franklin PhD, RDN LD, chief clinical officer; Cori Hooker, customer success manager; and Sarah Andrus MS, RDN, LD, a Nutrimedy dietitian.

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