Eating Well During Treatment

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Good nutrition provides energy, helps the body heal and supports the immune system. A healthy diet is more important than ever when you have cancer, but some symptoms and treatment side effects can make it hard to eat. Your care team may be able to adjust your treatment to reduce side effects or refer you to a dietitian who can help you stay well nourished as you face this challenge.

Fatigue: Treatment-related fatigue can make it harder to shop and prepare meals. Stock up on groceries, and cook in large batches to freeze into meal-sized portions. When possible, ask family and friends for help. Easy foods like yogurt, granola bars and crackers with cheese or peanut butter provide lots of nutrients with little work.

Loss of appetite: Many people don't feel like eating much during cancer treatment (known as anorexia). Try eating small meals or snacks every few hours rather than large meals. Keep nutrient-rich snacks on hand that can be eaten with little preparation. Mild exercise can stimulate the appetite, and some people swear by medicinal cannabis.

Weight loss: Weight loss, especially muscle loss known as cachexia, is common among people with cancer. Try eating every few hours instead of waiting until you're hungry. Focus on protein-rich foods, and add high-calorie extras like cream, butter and honey

Mouth and throat problems: Radiation and chemotherapy can cause mouth sores and throat problems that can make it painful to eat and difficult to swallow. Stick to soft foods and nutrient-rich drinks like shakes and smoothies. Puree food in a blender or moisten with sauces. Avoid spicy and acidic foods.

Changes in taste or smell: Some medications can make foods taste different and leave a bitter or metallic taste in the mouth. Spices and other intense flavors can help mask bad tastes. If meat doesn't taste right, try vegetable protein sources like beans and tofu. Suck on sugar-free mints or candy, and brush your teeth often.

Nausea and vomiting: Try eating small snacks throughout the day and sipping fluids to stay hydrated. Dry, bland and salty foods may lessen nausea, as can peppermint, ginger and medicinal cannabis. But avoid greasy and spicy foods and those with strong odors. After eating, rest sitting up instead of lying down.

Diarrhea and constipation: Fiber from fruits, vegetables and whole grains helps move food through

the digestive tract. Eat more fiber if you’re constipated, but avoid it if you have diarrhea. Greasy or high-fat foods can worsen diarrhea. For constipation, drink more fluids and get more exercise.

Avoiding infections: Cancer treatment can lower white blood cell counts and raise the risk of infection. Wash your hands before cooking, and clean fruits and vegetables thoroughly. Use separate utensils and cutting boards for produce and meat. Cook meat, seafood and eggs well. Avoid unpasteurized dairy products and foods from bulk bins, deli counters and salad bars.

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