A Blended Family of Foods

When smoothies may be beneficial during and after cancer treatment

November 12, 2017 By Danielle Penick

Last week I took a look at juicing and wrote about the pros and cons associated with it. At the end the post I recommended smoothies over juicing for those not on a fiber-restricted diet. Smoothies are not only high in fiber (which fills you up, helps with bowel regularity, and contains high amounts of vitamins and minerals), but are also typically made with protein and fat sources to help fill you up unlike juicing. The protein and fat options with smoothies are almost limitless. You can incorporate yogurt, keifer, milk, milk substitutes, nut butters, and even protein powders, among many other things.

Smoothies can also provide a quick meal or snack or even help with weight gain if this is something you are struggling with during your cancer journey. Cancer and cancer treatment often lead to unintentional weight loss. On top of it many patients undergoing esophageal or mouth surgery, radiation, or chemo to these areas often benefit from soft and cold foods due to mouth sores, inability to chew or swallow as well as usual, irritated mouth or esophagus, taste changes or even fatigue which makes it hard to cook meals for yourself at times. Research has shown that patients with adequate nutrition intake tend to have less side effects and typically experience less interruptions during treatment—which provides better quality of life outcomes.

When deciding to make a smoothie, a balanced smoothie is key, especially if it is replacing a meal in order to meet your nutrition needs and to keep you full. Some smoothies can be full of sugar and may not provide you with all of your nutrition needs. To ensure you have a balanced smoothie you can add protein and fat sources as mentioned above, along with fruits and vegetables. Generally, I like to recommend about 80% vegetables to 20% fruit ratio. For example, you could add cauliflower, spinach, sweet potatoes, or even avocados—which I highly recommend as it adds lots of calories and makes your smoothies quite creamy and has a mild flavor—and then add a banana for sweetness if desired along with your liquid base.

I’ve had some patients who were not able to eat well during treatment and didn’t like the taste of nutrition supplements like Ensure, Boost, Orgain, etc or they became burnt out on the flavor options. Instead I suggested that they add it to a blender with their favorite fruits, veggies, protein and fat sources to make their supplements more palatable and to add more calories. Some patients have added orange sherbet to vanilla flavored nutrition supplements to make it taste like an orange creamsicle or add peanut butter and cocoa powder to make it taste like a peanut butter cup. You can even experiment with different flavor combinations to see what you like best.

If you’re not trying to gain weight and are trying to increase your intake of fruits and vegetables, then this is where smoothies are an easy way to increase your intake of these important cancer prevention phytochemicals in your diet. Smoothie bowls are also popular and may be a good breakfast or snack option. You will find that many are topped with added nuts, seeds, coconut flakes, granola, or even whole slices of fruit. This is a good option for those without swallowing issues or mouth irritation and also a way to add calories if you need to. If you have these symptoms then you can choose to forgo the toppings.

If you are making your smoothies at home, you can typically get blenders for relatively cheap if you don't already have one. For most people about 8-16 ounce portions are reasonable as you can get a lot of fiber in a small portion size since food is blended. Some people who aren't used to eating or drinking a lot of fiber and suddenly start doing so may experience diarrhea. This is something to be mindful of and to gradually increase your intake of fiber if this is the case.

As you can imagine, smoothie combinations really are endless. Think of some of your favorite fruits and vegetables and try to experiment with them. You can challenge yourself to adding one new fruit or vegetable to the smoothie to get more variety in your diet—an added bonus is that you might not even realize it's in there. My favorite recommendation is to buy frozen fruits and vegetables as they will last a while, won't require you to use ice in your smoothie, and are often cheaper than fresh produce. Most of the nutrition content is still preserved when your produce is frozen too. For more ideas check out Cook For Your Life website as they have recipes for smoothies. This website is made for cancer survivors and you even have a choice to search for recipes or click on a tab for a specific diet that you may need to follow. For example, there is a tab for recipes for soft foods or high calorie foods depending on your specific needs. Balanced smoothies can be a great and refreshing option for many. Let me know what you come up with! Cheers!

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