

Eating well and cancer-managing changes in your weight



Weight changes can be common during cancer treatment. Some people gain weight, while others lose it. It is best to try to stay the same weight you were before you had cancer to help your strength, recovery and treatment.

This information sheet looks at both weight loss and weight gain during treatment. It also provides tips if you have a loss of appetite.

Loss of appetite

Changes in appetite can be normal due to the effect of your cancer, treatment, fatigue, pain, anxiety or depression. Even though you may not feel hungry, your body still needs food to maintain your weight and support your recovery. Think of food as part of your treatment plan. The following ideas may help.

- Eat small, regular meals and snacks over the day.
- Don't rely on your appetite to tell you it is time to eat.

Eat at regular times.

- Make the most of your appetite when it is good and you are most hungry.
- If you cannot face food, drink nutritious fluids such as smoothies, flavoured milk or a commercial supplement drink.
- Use easy to eat, soft, moist food such as soup, eggs, casseroles, mashed vegetables and gravy, stewed fruit and yoghurt, and milk puddings.
- Eat more calorie-rich foods like avocado, cream, butter or spreads, oil or salad dressings and protein-rich foods like meat, fish, chicken, eggs, nuts, nut butter, cheese, or milk.
- Make your food look appealing by serving smaller portions and using garnishes like herbs, tomato, lemon or orange slices.
- Keep ready-to-eat meals and snacks handy for times when you do not feel like preparing food. Pre-prepared soups, frozen meals, tinned fruit, yoghurt, cheese, dips and crackers are good examples.
- Enjoy your eating by sharing it with friends and family/whanau when possible.
- Try and relax before meals or take a short walk to increase your appetite.

Weight loss

The side effects of cancer and its treatments can make it hard to keep your weight on. It may also be difficult to eat as much as your body needs. Eating small frequent meals high in energy (calories), fat, carbohydrates and protein may help you maintain a stable weight.

Eating high-protein, high-energy foods will help your body get all the energy it needs. You can return to healthy eating patterns when your appetite changes. If you have another health condition such as diabetes you will need to check with your treatment team before you change what you eat.



Ways to increase the calories you eat and to help maintain your weight during treatment

High protein foods

- Meat, fish, chicken, eggs
- Tofu, legumes, lentils, hummus
- Nuts and nut butters
- Milk products or soy alternatives
- Cheese, yoghurt
- Nutritious drinks: milkshakes, smoothies or supplement drinks (like Complan, Fortisip, Ensure, Sustagen)

High energy foods

- Butter, oils, avocado, spreads, salad dressings, sour cream, cream cheese, cream, nuts and nut butters
- Biscuits, cakes, pastries, muffins, crumpets
- Fruit juice

Ways to boost your calorie and protein intake

- Use high fat milks, blue or silver top
- Add extra milk powder to milk (enriched milk - mix 3Tb powder in to 500 ml milk)
- Add extra margarine, avocado, oil, sour cream or grated cheese to bread, rice, pasta, and vegetables, savoury dishes and soup
- Cook food in oil or butter and add extra on the top
- Add a little cream to cereals, stewed fruits, desserts, baking, soups or drinks
- Snack on yoghurt, custard, ice-cream, milk puddings, stewed fruit, baking, dried fruit and nuts, fruit bread
- Bread or toast, pita bread, crumpets or crackers with margarine, pate, chutney, cheese, hummus, nut butters, avocado, jam or honey
- Choose nutritious fluids: milk, milo, milkshakes, fruit smoothies, juice or supplement drinks

Soup can be easy to digest, nourishing and versatile. Here are some ideas you could try:

- try clear soups to encourage the appetite and provide extra fluid but are low in protein and energy
- add energy and protein to the soups with meat, legumes and cereals such as rice and noodles, cheese cream, butter and oil
- vary the taste with nutmeg, ground cumin or curry powder

- puree or blend soups if you have difficulty swallowing
- thicken soups with pureed vegetables, cream, eggs and enriched milk.

Nutritional supplement drinks

If you have tried increasing your calorie intake but are still struggling to eat enough, you may benefit from a nutritional supplement drink. Talk with a dietitian or your treatment team to get the right drinks for your needs such as:

- powdered drinks: Complan, Ensure, Fortisip
- ready to drink liquids: Ensure Plus, Fortisip, Fortisip Multifibre, Ensure Two Cal HN
- fortified fruit juices: Fortijuice, Ensure Plus Juice, Recover Juice
- Calogen (fat only and can be used in certain situations)

Some supplement drinks are available in supermarkets and others from pharmacies. You may be able to get a Special Authority Number and prescription for supplements at minimal cost, after an assessment by your treatment team.

Feeding Tubes

If your nutritional needs are unable to be met, your treatment team may suggest a feeding tube. A feeding tube can be used short or long term, to supplement your meals or be your complete source of food and fluid. It is a way to ensure that your body gets the nutrition you need while you are having treatment. Feeding tubes can be managed at home with support and guidance from your treatment team.

Weight gain

Some people gain weight due to some chemotherapy medications, steroids, hormone therapy, being less active, eating more and/or retaining fluid.

A small increase in weight is not usually a problem. But a large weight gain can affect your general health. It can increase your blood pressure and your risk of developing diabetes and heart problems. Weight increases can affect how you feel about yourself, your confidence, and energy levels.

Why you might be putting on weight

A common side effect of chemotherapy is fatigue. This can lead to you being less active. Treatment may cause fluid retention (called oedema) that can increase your weight. Chemotherapy can also cause menopause for some women. This means a lowered metabolism (the rate at

which your body uses energy) and may result in weight gain. During treatment you may crave less healthy foods.

If you are having steroids as part of your treatment, side effects include an increased appetite. Long-term use can lead to a build-up of fatty tissue.

Hormonal therapy involves medicines that lower the amount of oestrogen and/or progesterone in women, and testosterone in men. Changes in hormone levels can lead to increased fatty tissue, a reduced muscle mass, and a slower metabolism.

People with cancer sometimes eat more to make themselves feel better during treatment. Over time, this can result in weight gain. Most treatment can mean you are less active than usual over a longer period of time, often causing weight gain.

Managing weight gain

Losing weight is not easy and can take time. Don't be hard on yourself - try to set realistic goals through healthy eating and keeping active. Get family/whānau and friends to support you.

Tips for losing weight

Talk to your treatment team about safe ways to lose weight. Avoid fad diets or medications promising rapid weight loss. You're more likely to keep weight off if you lose it slowly and steadily.

- Follow the [healthy eating tips here](#).
- Try to have smaller meals - use a smaller plate and avoid going back for seconds.
- Choose whole grain bread, pasta and cereals – these contain increased fibre which can make you feel fuller for longer.
- Try to eat plenty of fruit and vegetables which are filling but not too high in calories.
- Limit fat, sugar, and white flour. Swap biscuits, cakes and sweets for unsweetened and unsalted options. Snack on fruit and vegetable sticks.
- Drink water, milk, unsweetened tea or coffee rather than sugary drinks.
- Avoid or limit alcohol as it is high in calories.
- Try healthier ways of cooking such as steaming or BBQ instead of frying.

- limit the amount of takeaways you eat as they are usually high in fat and salt.
- Increase your activity – (see our book *Keeping Active* on www.cancernz.org.nz). Always start slowly and build up gradually.

If you are concerned about your weight gain, speak to your treatment team for help in managing this.

Managing fluid retention

Call your doctor if you experience any of the following signs of fluid retention:

- if your skin feels stiff or small indents are left after pressing on the swollen area
- if you have swelling in your arms or legs, especially around the ankles and wrists
- if rings, watches, bracelets, or shoes are tighter than usual
- if your hands, elbows, wrists, fingers, or legs are less easy to move.

Further information

- [Cancer Victoria Taste and Smell Changes fact sheet](#)
- Cancer Council Australia: [Nutrition](#)
- Katzin, Carolyn. (2011) *The Cancer Nutrition Centre Handbook—An Essential Guide for Cancer Patients and Their Families*. Los Angeles: CFK.
- Van Mil, José; MacKenzie-Archer C. (2009) *Healthy Eating During Chemotherapy*. USA: Kyle Books.
- [National Health Service UK. Making the most of your pureed meals \(For Head and Neck Cancer Patients\) \(2017\)](#)
- [Morgan-Jones, P, MacLeod, R, Ellis, P, Lynch, J; Lobster for Jasino \(fabulous food for final days of life\), 2018, HammondCare Media:Howells, S. Beyond the Blender, Dysphagia Made Easy](#)
- [Cancer.net managing weight after a cancer diagnosis](#)
- [Breast Cancer Now - Healthy eating after breast cancer](#)