

Nutrition during cancer

Key points

- Cancer and its treatment place major demands on your body - physically, mentally and nutritionally.
- Diet and exercise play a significant role during cancer treatment and management.
- During cancer treatment and recovery, your body will have different nutritional needs.
- Nutrition can be an empowering tool during this time, to support your body and speed up repair.
- To prevent weight and/or muscle loss, you might need more protein and energy (which is measured in calories/kilojoules) during treatment.
- Eat a variety of foods to speed up your recovery. Try to incorporate some physical activity to rebuild your muscles and help you bounce back from the side effects of treatment.
- Focus on eating healthily once you've recovered from the side effects of your treatment.

On this page

[Details](#)

[When to see a dietitian](#)

[Top tips](#)

Details

If you've been diagnosed with cancer

Cancer and its treatment place major demands on your body - physically, mentally and nutritionally. There are things you can do to support your body and recovery during this time.

Diet and exercise play a significant role during cancer treatment and management. You should speak to an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) about your diet, and a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist about movement and exercise to support yourself throughout this time.

Eat well

Eating well during and after cancer treatment can help you:

- stay energised
- keep your immune system strong
- reduce muscle or weight losses
- reduce treatment-related side effects
- boost your mood and quality of life.

All which can help you tolerate the best treatment doses and speed up your recovery.

Supportive nutrition can also reduce problems and hospital admissions by:

- healing wounds and repairing damaged tissues
- supporting your immune system
- helping you better manage any side-effects or difficulties eating during treatment
- reducing the risk of cancer returning
- reducing the risk of other chronic health issues or conditions.

Exercise

Staying active during and after treatment can:

- strengthen your muscles and bones
- improve energy, mood and circulation
- reduce stress and fatigue
- help you tolerate your treatments
- reduce your risk of developing new cancers or other health complications.

Nutritional needs throughout different phases of cancer

During cancer treatment and recovery, your body will have different nutritional needs. Nutrition can be an empowering tool during this time, to support your body and speed up repair.

During treatment

To prevent weight and/or muscle loss, you might need more protein and energy (which is measured in calories/kilojoules) during treatment. Try eating smaller, more regular meals, or adding regular snacks into your day. Include foods rich in protein and energy regularly across the day.

Tips for boosting energy and protein in your diet:

- choose full-fat milk and dairy foods
- fortify milk with extra protein by adding 1-2 scoops of a protein powder or skim milk powder into 500mls of milk. The fortified milk can be used in your cereal, tea or coffee, smoothies, soups or in milk-based sauces
- add a handful of nuts, a tablespoon of almond meal or spoon of a nut butter (such as peanut or almond butter) into meals, smoothies or porridge mixtures
- add an extra dollop of butter, olive oil, sour cream, mayonnaise, natural yoghurt or oil-based dressing
- sprinkle a handful of grated cheese onto vegetables such as potato, greens or cauliflower
- add cheddar, feta or cottage cheese into salads, sauces, pastas, sandwiches and on crackers
- nibble on a small antipasto plate with some cheese, olives, dips, pate, grapes, crackers and cold meats or smoked salmon
- if you feel nauseous, try salty foods such as a small packet of potato chips, popcorn, pretzels or corn chips
- if you prefer sweeter foods opt for a dessert or pudding as a snack or for after dinner. Options can include custard, rice pudding or ice cream. These can be nice with some stewed or canned fruit
- avoid filling up on too much tea, coffee or water as these do not provide your body with a lot of energy or protein. Instead, substitute with milk or juice-based drinks. These can count as part of your recommended fluid intake and are more nourishing
- take some easy- to- eat or portable snacks when you are heading off to treatments or medical appointments. Options can include muesli bars, energy balls, muffins, breakfast drinks, protein smoothies, or milkshakes

- an APD can also help you with other nourishing drink recipes or ready-made higher calorie energy and protein drink options.

If you have a sore mouth, or are having trouble swallowing or digesting your food, you may need specific diet and texture modifications. You may also need nutritional supplement drinks or tube feeds. These options are managed via your treating team.

While this may seem overwhelming to manage at first, you will do much better (and feel better as well) if you can meet all your daily energy and nutrient needs. If you have lost weight or have any concerns about your eating or drinking, you should speak to an APD. They can provide advice on the best dietary support options so you can continue to eat well.

Malnutrition is a major concern for people with cancer and Dietitians Australia advocates for the regular nutrition health screening of all individuals in treatment. You can learn more about the symptoms and risks of [malnutrition](#) here.

Vitamins and supplements

Before starting any vitamin, mineral or supplement, speak with your doctor, pharmacist or dietitian. Some supplements can affect or interact with your medical treatments. Therefore, it is essential to inform the team of anything you are taking.

A dietitian will also be able to assess your current diet to work out whether you need any extra supplements and the appropriate doses. They can also help you adjust your usual diet so that you can get any nutrients that may be low or deficient from whole foods. This is generally the better option for you and your body.

After treatment

Eat a variety of foods to speed up your recovery. Try to incorporate some physical activity to rebuild your muscles and help you bounce back from the side effects of treatment. After treatment, you may still have some side effects that require ongoing management. You can discuss this with your dietitian for specialised advice to support your health.

Recovery

Focus on eating healthily once you've recovered from the side effects of your treatment. Prioritise plant-based foods including fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains. Balance these foods with those that provide protein and other essential body strength nutrients such as iron, zinc, B12 and calcium.

You should also try to stay active and exercise regularly. Aim for 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate activity each week.

When to see a dietitian

We recommend seeing a dietitian if you:

- are concerned about your diet and lifestyle putting you at higher risk of developing cancer
- have been diagnosed with cancer
- are undergoing cancer treatment
- are recovering from cancer or treatment
- would like a personalised eating plan to ensure you're actively reducing your risk of cancer or managing your diagnosis
- want personalised advice from a professional on healthy eating and lifestyle habits
- want personalised advice to improve your energy levels, strength and daily function
- have lost weight without trying
- are eating poorly because of a reduced appetite or ability to eat
- are experiencing symptoms that are associated with or impact your eating (for example, mouth sores, nausea, vomiting, taste changes, diarrhoea, constipation)
- have changed your eating pattern from your usual, or are cutting out/avoiding specific food groups or nutrients
- are taking any vitamins, minerals, herbal or other supplements that may interfere with your cancer treatment.

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are university-trained nutrition experts. They provide evidence-based nutrition advice tailored to your personal needs and circumstances. They also know about your changing nutrition needs during the different stages of the cancer experience. They can help you with everyday menus, recipes and snack ideas.

[Find a dietitian](#)

Top tips

- Try eating smaller, more regular meals, or adding regular snacks into your day.
- Include foods rich in protein and energy regularly across the day.
- Prioritise plant-based foods including fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains.

- Balance these foods with those that provide protein and other essential body strength nutrients such as iron, zinc, B12 and calcium.
- Aim for 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate activity each week.

This health advice page was peer-reviewed by an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) in October 2026.