

Cancer and its treatment may cause people to experience a loss of appetite. Loss of appetite is not feeling hungry, not wanting to eat, or having no taste for food. Loss of appetite can lead to unhealthy weight loss and poor quality of life. Side-effect management and good nutrition are an important part of cancer treatment.

RISK OF MALNUTRITION

Low appetite and weight loss can increase the risk of malnutrition. Malnutrition occurs when a person does not eat or absorb enough calories or key nutrients needed for healthy body function. Cancer patients who are malnourished are at greater risk for health complications, hospitalization, infections, loss of muscle strength and poor quality of life. Malnourished patients may need to delay, change or stop cancer treatment.

Loss of appetite and weight loss can be caused by

- Cancer
- Cancer treatments
- Other medications
- Other side effects, such as pain, fatigue, nausea, mouth sores, changes in taste, constipation or diarrhea
- An enlarged spleen or liver that pushes on the stomach and creates a feeling of fullness
- Emotional issues, such as stress, anxiety or depression

To decrease the risk of malnutrition, try to avoid losing weight during treatment unless you are advised to lose weight by your healthcare team. Dieting is not recommended during cancer treatment. Keep track of your weight to monitor for weight loss.

Tell your healthcare team about any weight loss, decreased appetite or side effects that make it difficult for you to eat. Ask for a referral to a registered dietitian who has experience working with cancer patients and who can give you advice on how to improve your nutrition.

TIPS TO BOOST APPETITE

Try the following to increase your appetite:

- Be as active as possible. Do some physical activity before a meal. Before starting an exercise program, consult with your healthcare team.
- Sit down and eat with family or friends and talk about something besides cancer and treatment. Put away distractions, such as mobile phones.
- Try looking at pictures of food or watching a cooking show to increase your interest in food.
- Ask your healthcare team if medication to increase your appetite may help.

- Talk to your healthcare team about ways to manage other side effects that may be causing your loss of appetite. **Visit www.LLS.org/booklets (filter by Side Effect Management) to view the *Side-Effect Management* series.**
- Talk to your healthcare team if you think stress, anxiety or depression may be interfering with your appetite. Ask for a referral to a mental health professional.

TIPS TO BOOST NUTRITION

These tips may differ from what you think of as healthy eating. However, if you are at risk for malnutrition, it is more important to eat enough calories than to eat only healthy foods.

- Take note of the times during the day when your appetite is best. Do not limit food when your appetite is good. Eat your largest meal when you feel the hungriest, whether it is breakfast, lunch or dinner.
- Eat 5-6 small meals per day and snack anytime.
- Choose foods that are high in protein such as beans, chicken, fish, meat, yogurt, tofu and eggs. During meals, eat high-protein foods first.
- Choose foods that are high in calories. Do not select foods that are labeled “low-fat,” “fat-free” or “diet.”
- Keep snacks nearby so you can snack at any time. Use an insulated lunch bag to take snacks with you when you leave home.
- If you tend to forget to eat, set an alarm or a reminder on your cell phone to remember to eat.
- If you feel full quickly when eating, do not drink any liquids 30 minutes before a meal, so you have more room for solid food. Then drink liquids between meals. Choose liquids with extra calories, not diet drinks.
- Eat a bedtime snack. Choose something easy to digest, such as peanut butter and crackers. If you tend to experience reflux or heartburn, eat at least an hour before lying down.
- If food is not appealing, try a nutritious beverage, such as a high-protein shake or smoothie, instead of solid food.
- Ask family members or friends to buy groceries and prepare meals for you when you are too tired to shop or cook. Use online meal delivery calendars such as www.MealTrain.com or www.TakeThemAMeal.com.
- Consider buying precooked meals or use an online delivery service to order cooked meals.

- Ask your healthcare team to recommend a liquid nutrition supplement (for example, Boost®, Ensure® or generic versions). Add a scoop of protein powder, yogurt or ice cream for added protein and calories.
 - Ask for coupons or print online coupons to offset the cost of liquid nutrition supplements.

FOODS TO BOOST NUTRITION

Add these foods to snacks or meals to boost calories and/or protein:

- Butter/margarine
- Oils
- Dry or evaporated milk
- Nuts, seeds, granola and wheat germ
- Dried fruits
- Mayonnaise, creamy salad dressings or sour cream
- Yogurt, ice cream, whole milk or heavy cream
- Peanut butter, almond butter or other nut butters
- Eggs or egg substitutes
- Avocados
- Cheese

Here are a few examples of ways to add these foods to dishes:

- Add protein powder, peanut butter or avocado to shakes and smoothies.
- Add dried fruits, nuts and seeds to salads.
- Mix sour cream with mashed potatoes.
- Spread mayonnaise on sandwiches.
- Add avocados to toast, soup, sandwiches or salads.
- Add cheese to soups, casseroles, vegetables and sandwiches.
- Use butter or margarine to prepare vegetables or warm cereal.
- Add whipped cream to desserts.
- Add powdered milk to creamy soups.

Keep in mind that these foods are only suggestions. Make changes for food allergies and follow nutrition guidelines provided by your healthcare team.

TRACKING SIDE EFFECTS

Certain foods, medications or activities may trigger or make side effects worse. Track your daily health and habits in a journal or app on your phone. This may help you avoid the things that worsen your side effects.

With the LLS Health Manager™ mobile app, you can track side effects, medication, food and hydration. You can set up reminders to take medications and to eat and drink water throughout the day. You can also share the information with your doctor to identify patterns and develop strategies to improve low appetite. **Visit www.LLS.org/HealthManager to download.**

NUTRITION THERAPY

If you are unable to eat enough food or drink enough fluids by mouth, your healthcare team may suggest nutrition therapy. This means that nutrition is given to you either through a feeding tube or through a vein. If you need a feeding tube, members of your healthcare team will teach you how to care for the tube, administer nutrition and closely monitor weight loss.

Questions To Ask Your Healthcare Team

- **What are the possible side effects of my treatment?**
- **What can I do to manage these side effects?**
- **Can I be referred to a registered dietitian?**
- **Can I be referred to palliative (supportive) care for help managing side effects?**
- **Can you give me nutrition guidelines to follow?**
- **Can you recommend a liquid nutrition supplement?**
- **What signs or symptoms require a trip to the emergency room?**

GET ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's **Information Specialists**, master's level oncology social workers and health educators, can provide information and support and connect you to our **Clinical Trial Support Center** and **Registered Dietitians**.

- Call **800.955.4572** Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. (ET)
- Visit www.LLS.org/PatientSupport

Acknowledgement

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