



## Tips for Healthy Eating after Cancer Treatment

Once you have finished treatment for cancer, some of the things that made eating hard or unpleasant *during* treatment may get better. This article will give some tips on how to eat healthy after cancer.

If you have specific concerns, a registered dietitian nutritionist can help you make good food choices, managing diet with lingering side effects, or losing or regaining weight. Reach out to your cancer center or provider if they have not already given you the names and numbers of a dietitian.

Be sure to check with your care team if there are any foods you should stay away from after treatment. Also, if you have had surgery to your head, neck, or have had any part of your stomach or intestines removed, talk with your care team about diet and nutrition plans specific to your care.



Below are some tips on how to eat healthier, enjoy food again, and to make the most out of your diet:

### Connect with Food

After treatment, take some time to reconnect with food. Do this by trying and sharing new recipes, ingredients, and flavors. Visit a local farm or farmers' market to try seasonal and local foods. Go to a nutrition workshop and learn how food can play an important role in health and well-being. Limit eating on-the-go - enjoy meals at the table with loved ones.

### Aim for a Consistent Meal Pattern

A consistent meal pattern can help you stay on track with health goals. Skipping meals, or not taking the time for meals, can lead to overeating later on in the day. If 5 or more hours have gone without eating, that's a red flag. Be sure to listen to hunger cues and stop to eat, hydrate, and take a break. If you find yourself getting full quickly, aim for a few smaller meals throughout the day. Make meals that are easy for you and that you enjoy.

### Stay Away from Fad Diets

Often, diets and quick fixes lead to short-term weight loss – and regaining. Weight cycling can increase the risk of heart problems and can cause an unhealthy relationship with food. After cancer treatment and in general, it is best to stay away from cleanses, 30-day diets, weight loss supplements, and diets backed by testimonials, rather than science. Many of these diets go against your own unique health needs. Ask to speak with a registered dietitian nutritionist for guidance on making long-lasting health and dietary changes. A good place to start is by making SMART goals:

- Specific.
- Measurable.
- Attainable.
- Realistic.

- Timely.

Think about what to ADD, rather than what to take away. For example, “Monday and Wednesday this month I am going to ADD oatmeal with walnuts and blueberries into my breakfast routine.”

## Food First, Not Supplements

Try to meet your nutritional needs with food alone, unless a dietary supplement has been recommended or prescribed by your provider. Herbal supplements in particular are not well-studied in humans, are not regulated by the FDA, and may interact with other medications. It is best to check with your care team before taking anything that is not prescribed to you. As you work on your diet after treatment, you will be able to add more foods to get the vitamins and minerals you need.

## Flavor Your Food with Herbs & Spices

Many processed and packaged foods and flavorings have high levels of sodium. Try to flavor foods with spices, herbs, citrus, or vinegar when cooking or marinating. These offer additional nutritional and flavor benefits without adding to your daily sodium intake. If you have changes to your taste and/or smell, you might have to test which spices and herbs work best for you.

## Focus on Plants and Fiber

Fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains have powerful cancer-protective benefits. Many fruits and vegetables have antioxidants, such as vitamin C and vitamin E, which reduce the risk of damage to healthy cells. The American Institute for Cancer Research recommends making plant foods the main attraction. About 2/3 of your plate should be filled with vegetables, whole grains, and fruit. One-third of your plate may be lean protein, such as fish or chicken – or you can keep it all plant-based. A good goal is to try for 2.5 cups of non-starchy fruits and vegetables per day (fresh, frozen, or canned)!

You should aim for 30 grams of dietary fiber per day. Fiber has been shown to help reduce the risk of several chronic diseases, including heart disease and diabetes. Dietary fiber can promote satiety or the feeling of satisfaction after eating. Dietary fiber is found in fruits, vegetables, whole grains (such as oatmeal, brown rice, whole-wheat bread), and legumes (beans, lentils, peas).

## Pick Lean Proteins

Lean proteins are better for overall health. Lean proteins include chicken, fish, eggs, turkey, beans, tofu, legumes, and low-fat dairy products like cottage cheese and yogurt. Try to add these lean proteins into meals as much as possible. Red meat (beef, pork, venison) should be limited to 2-3 portions per week. Try to stay away from processed meats, like lunchmeat, bacon, sausage, scrapple, and pork roll.

## Choose Heart-Healthy Fats

Limit fried foods and foods high in saturated fat for overall health after cancer treatment. Saturated fats are found in fatty meats, butter, full-fat dairy, and cheese. When cooking, swap butter for heart-healthy cooking oils like olive oil, canola, sunflower, and avocado oil. Aim to add fish into your weekly plan at least twice a week. Fatty fish, such as salmon, sardines, herring, and lake trout, are all sources of anti-inflammatory omega-3 fatty acids. Nuts and seeds are great sources of healthy fats, protein, fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Walnuts in particular are packed with beneficial omega-3 fatty acids.

## Skip the Soda and Limit Alcoholic Drinks

Sugar-sweetened beverages like soda, juice, and sweetened teas are all sources of added sugar. These beverages can increase the risk of weight gain and several chronic diseases, including diabetes, liver disease, and heart disease. Stay hydrated with water, flavored water, or infused water with fruit slices. A great

alternative to soda is sparkling flavored water – still carbonated, and without added sugar. If alcoholic drinks are consumed, limit consumption to no more than 2 drinks for men and 1 drink for women per day.

## Ask for Help

Some problems caused by treatment, like changes to smell or taste, may last longer than the treatment itself. Don't get discouraged, as these usually get better with time. Stay away from any foods with smells or tastes that bother you. If you are having problems with nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea, talk with your provider about medications that might help. Make sure to keep up with dental appointments and use any mouthwashes that your care team has prescribed. Eating with plastic forks and spoons may also help if you have a metallic taste in your mouth. Above all, be open with your care team about any problems you are having with eating or with your diet. There are ways to help you return to healthy and fun eating after cancer treatment.

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