



Nutritional Needs During Your Cancer Treatment

Maintaining a balanced diet during cancer treatment can be difficult. It can trigger appetite changes that impact your food choices and make it harder to get the nutrients you need. Building sustainable, well-rounded eating habits can boost energy, help manage treatment side effects, promote healing, maintain muscle strength, and curb weight fluctuation.

Managing unplanned weight loss

Unplanned weight loss can lead to muscle loss, fatigue, increased risk of infection, hospitalization, and difficulty tolerating treatment. If you are losing weight, eat foods that are high in calories and protein (see chart for snack ideas).

Try these tips to help give your body the calories and nutrients it needs:

- Plan to eat small portions every 2–3 hours through the day. Set alarms or reminders to help stay on track.
- Have a variety of foods on hand and ready to eat such as frozen options, freshly prepared meals, and snacks.
- Consider nutrition drinks, such as Boost™ or Ensure™. You can drink them on their own or mix them into a smoothie or ice cream milkshake. There are many brands and flavors that can fit different dietary needs or preferences.
- Add dips, condiments, seasonings, and toppings to food to make the most of each bite. For example, a baked potato with butter is good. A baked potato with butter, cheese, and sour cream is better.

Examples of high calorie snack combinations

Eat a filling and nutritious snack by mixing and matching items from each of the below columns:

50 Calories	
• ½ banana • ½ cup fruit • 1 cup veggies • 1 tbsp. cream cheese • ½ cup unsweetened applesauce	• 15 Goldfish™ crackers • ½ cup skim milk • 1 tbsp. chopped nuts • 4 saltines
100 Calories	
• 1 slice bread • ½ cup regular yogurt • ¼ cup hummus • 1 slice cheese • ½ avocado • 1 egg • 3 cups popcorn • 4 vanilla wafers	• ¾ cup dry cereal • 2 small pancakes • 25 pistachios • ½ cup edamame • ½ cup pudding • 2 tbsp. honey, syrup, jelly, or jam
200 Calories	
• 2 tbsp. peanut butter • 1 cup granola • 1 large pita bread • 1 bagel • 3 tbsp. trail mix • 1 cup whole cottage cheese • 1 small soft pretzel	• 2 oz cheese • 1 cup soup (broth based) • 1 cup cooked pasta • 1 cup regular ice cream • 1 pack of sandwich crackers



Some high-calorie snack combinations:

- A banana, peanut butter, and toast
- Fruit, yogurt, and granola
- Hummus, veggies, and pita bread or chips
- Two eggs, a bagel, and a slice of cheese
- Guacamole and chips

Managing unplanned weight gain

Bodies respond to treatments in many ways. While some people might lose weight, some might gain weight due to their medication mixtures, hormone therapy, or other issues.

If you are noticing weight gain, it's still important to eat enough so that your body gets the fuel it needs. Nutrient-rich, balanced options can help lower the chance of cancer recurrence, prevent other cancers, and reduce the risk of long-term health problems like diabetes and heart disease.

Maintain your weight during treatment by following these steps

- **Don't skip meals:** Missing meals can slow down your metabolism and make weight gain more likely.
- **Eat more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables:** Daily servings of foods such as brown rice, quinoa, whole-wheat bread, beans, and assorted fruits and vegetables are low-calorie options that increase your fiber and nutrient intake.
- **Eat fewer ultra-processed foods:** Make more home-cooked meals and limit meals with lots of added sugars and saturated fats, which include fast food, baked goods, fried foods, and chips.
- **Limit red and processed meats:** Try not to exceed 2-3 servings of red, salt-cured, and processed meats (bacon, sausage, and most deli meats) per week.
- **Drink zero-calorie beverages:** Drink water, flavored water, and decaffeinated coffee or tea to help cut back on calories and stay hydrated during treatment.
- **Reduce alcohol or stop drinking altogether:** Alcohol is linked to multiple types of cancer, plus it's a diuretic that can leave you dehydrated during treatment.
- **Stay active:** Physical activity is important during and after treatment, so try to move your body in some way every day through walking, running, weight training, swimming, or whatever activity you enjoy.

Managing treatment symptoms while eating

You may notice symptoms during treatment and wonder how best to deal with them. Common symptoms include nausea, changes in taste, mouth sores, dry mouth, issues with chewing or swallowing, diarrhea, constipation, and fatigue.

Symptom	Nutrition Tips
Taste changes	• Increase the flavor of foods with herbs, spices, seasoning blends, marinades, and sauces • Use tart flavors like citrus, vinegar, and pickled foods (avoid if you have mouth sores) • Add sugar or salt • Eat with plastic spoons, forks, and knives to avoid metallic flavors • Use a mouth rinse prior to meals (1 quart water, $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp. salt, 1 tsp. baking soda)
Trouble chewing or swallowing	• Avoid coarse, dry, or rough foods • Change to soft, moist, or pureed foods, as needed • Use sauces, dressings, gravy, or broth to moisten dry foods • Choose high-protein foods, like ground or shredded meats, scrambled eggs, cottage cheese, rice pudding, fish, tofu, mashed beans, and macaroni and cheese • Include drinks like milkshakes, smoothies, and protein drinks
Mouth sores	• Use a mouth rinse prior to meals (1 quart water, $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp. salt, 1 tsp. baking soda) prior to meals • Drink through a straw to avoid sore areas • Avoid alcohol and mouthwashes with alcohol • Eat soft, bland foods that are at room temperature • Make foods easier to swallow (see above) • Avoid irritating foods like tart and acidic foods (citrus, tomatoes, pineapples), salty foods, rough or hard foods, spicy or heavily seasoned foods, alcohol, and carbonated drinks
Dry mouth	• Stay hydrated by drinking 8–10 cups of fluid per day • Eat soft, moist foods • Eat tart foods to increase saliva (lemonade, lemon sorbet, cranberry juice) • Suck on popsicles, sorbets, ice chips, or frozen fruit • Chew sugar-free gum or candy • Use a mouth rinse before meals
Fatigue	• Stay hydrated by drinking 8–10 cups of fluid per day • Choose ready-to-eat or easy-to-make foods like pudding cups, peanut butter, tuna, cereal bars, trail mix, cheese and crackers, eggs, and other easy options (<i>see chart on front page</i>) • Use pre-made high-calorie and high-protein shakes • Keep meal prep simple by using prepared and frozen foods • Encourage family, friends, or caretakers to help with preparing meals or shopping for groceries • Try to be physically active, when able
Nausea and vomiting	• Try to eat a number of small meals throughout the day • Choose bland, starchy foods and clear liquids at room temperature • Avoid greasy or fried, high-fat foods and highly seasoned foods • Drink liquids between meals rather than with meals • Avoid strong odors by staying out of food prep areas and using exhaust fans or opening windows • Speak with doctor about anti-nausea medications and how to best time them with meals
Diarrhea	• Increase fluid intake and replenish electrolytes with over-the-counter electrolyte drinks • Cut back on fat intake, limit dairy as needed • Limit insoluble fiber from most raw fruits and vegetables, and increase soluble fiber from oats and bananas
Constipation	• Increase fluid intake by drinking 8–10 cups per day • Increase fiber intake, slowly, with fruits, vegetables, and whole grains • Increase light activity if able, like walking, yoga, or swimming

Common nutrition questions during and after cancer treatment

Do I need to avoid certain foods during treatment or to help prevent recurrence?

Unless directly told by your doctor or dietitian, you do not have to avoid any specific foods during treatment. Foods that are high in vitamins, minerals, and other key nutrients help give your body the support it needs during treatment and may also help prevent recurrence in the future.

Does sugar feed or cause cancer?

This is a common myth. The short answer is no. Sugar does not feed cancer. There is no evidence that avoiding sugar during treatment improves outcomes. However, research shows that increased calorie intake can lead to extra weight gain and body fat, leading to a higher risk for cancer or cancer recurrence.

Are supplements OK during treatment?

Always check with your doctor to make sure any supplements you're taking do not interact with your medications. If you have lab work showing that you're low in a vitamin or mineral, you may be told to take supplements. Eating a diet high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein can help to ensure you're getting enough nutrients.

Do I need to avoid soy?

This is another common misconception, particularly in breast cancer. Soy does not need to be avoided. It does not increase the risk of cancer or impact treatment. In fact, studies suggest that soy is a healthy plant-based alternative for proteins, and part of a well-balanced diet.

Should I avoid processed foods and meat?

Ultra-processed foods and processed meats have been linked to a higher overall cancer risk. The American Institute of Cancer Research recommends limiting these two types of food and focusing on a well-rounded diet of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.

Can I drink alcohol?

Research from the American Institute of Cancer Research has found that even less than one drink per day can increase the risk of several common cancers. Cutting back or avoiding alcohol entirely can reduce these risks. Alcohol is not recommended during treatment, as it can interfere with your treatment or impact liver function.

Can I eat anything specific to boost my blood count?

There are no specific foods that are proven to increase blood counts. It is best to focus on food safety to help reduce the risk for infection. These tips include washing your hands before, during, and after cooking, cooking foods to the recommended temperatures, rinsing all fruits and vegetables under running water, keeping food prep areas clean, and avoiding moldy foods, foods that are undercooked, and unpasteurized dairy products.

Registered dietitians are available during and after treatment to discuss nutrition and healthy eating. Ask your provider for a referral if you're interested.



Siteman Cancer Center complies with applicable federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability or sex.

Atención: hay servicios de asistencia de idiomas disponibles a su disposición sin costo. Llame al 314-747-5682 (TTY: 1-800-735-2966).

注意：免费提供语言协助服务，如有需要敬请致电 314-747-5682 (TTY: 1-800-735-2966)。

2937550-11-20-25-B