

Eating problems and cancer

Cancer can cause problems with eating and drinking. This information is about the different problems that can happen and ways of dealing with them.

Any words that are underlined are explained in the word list at the end. The word list also includes the pronunciation of the words in English.

If you have any questions about this information, ask your doctor, nurse or dietitian at the hospital where you are having treatment.

You can also call Macmillan Cancer Support on freephone **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language. When you call us, please tell us in English which language you need.

There is more cancer information in other languages at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

This information is about:

- How cancer can affect eating
- If you are too tired to cook or eat
- Looking after your mouth
- Mouth and throat problems
- Feeling sick, heartburn and indigestion
- Bowel changes that affect your diet
- Changes to your appetite and weight
- How Macmillan can help you
- Word list
- More information in [\[language\]](#)
- References and thanks

How cancer can affect eating

Eating problems caused by cancer

Depending on where the cancer is in your body, problems can include:

- feeling sick
- being sick
- pain
- problems with digestion
- weight loss.

Eating problems caused by cancer treatments

Cancer treatments can sometimes cause problems with eating, drinking or your digestion.

Some eating problems may be minor, while others may affect you more. Problems may stop when you finish treatment or sometimes they can last longer.

Talk to your cancer doctor, nurse or GP if you have problems with eating. They can give you advice and support and they can refer you to a dietitian.

Risk of infection (low immunity)

Cancer and cancer treatments can sometimes weaken your immune system. This is called having low immunity. It means you are more at risk of getting an infection.

Your doctor may ask you to avoid certain foods. This is to stop you getting a gastric (tummy) infection. You will also need to be even more careful when preparing, storing and reheating food. Your cancer nurse will talk to you about this. We have more information in [language] in the factsheet 'Healthy eating.' Visit macmillan.org.uk/translations

Special diets

Some people may need to follow a special diet. For example, if you have had stomach or bowel surgery or if you have diabetes. Your dietitian can give you advice on this.

If you are too tired to cook or eat

Feeling very tired is common with cancer and cancer treatment. You may find it hard to cook your meals or you may feel too tired to eat them.

What you can do

- Make sure you have enough food at home that is easy to make. You could use ready-made meals, frozen meals and tinned food.
- Try to plan ahead. If you have a freezer, prepare food while you are feeling better, and freeze it for when you are tired.
- Ask family or friends to help with shopping or cooking.

- Try eating smaller meals often throughout the day, rather than a few big meals.
- If you need help at home with cooking or eating, tell your GP or dietitian. They can arrange for meals to be delivered to your home, or someone to help prepare meals at home.

Looking after your mouth

A common side effect of cancer treatment is mouth problems. It is very important to look after your mouth during treatment, to avoid getting an infection.

Keeping your mouth healthy

- You may need to see your dentist before cancer treatment starts. They can tell you the best toothpaste to use during treatment.
- Clean your mouth, tongue and teeth gently each morning and evening, with a soft children's toothbrush. Avoid using toothpicks and check with your cancer doctor before using floss.
- If you wear dentures, soak them in a denture cleaning solution overnight. Leave them out for as long as you can during the day to stop them rubbing your gums.
- Drink lots of fluids, especially water. Milk is also good.
- Follow any advice from your cancer doctor or nurse about how to care for your mouth.

If you have a sore mouth

- Cool foods and drinks may be better than very hot or very cold ones.
- Add crushed ice to drinks or freeze juice in ice cube trays – sucking on ice cubes can sooth your mouth. Ice cream can also help.
- Some fruit juices can sting if they are acidic. Try less acidic juices like pear or blackcurrant.
- Drink through a straw.
- Avoid salty or spicy foods – these may sting.
- Avoid rough textured foods such as crusty bread, toast or raw vegetables.
- Keep your food moist with sauces and gravies.
- Taking painkillers before eating can help you swallow more easily.
- If you have a sore mouth, tell your doctor or nurse. They can check if you have a mouth infection.
- Your doctor can prescribe a gel or stronger mouthwash. Check with your cancer doctor or nurse before buying your own as sometimes these can be too strong.

- If your mouth is not too sore, a salt-water mouthwash can help.

Mouth and throat problems

Dry mouth

Radiotherapy to the head and neck area can damage your salivary glands and cause a dry mouth. Some cancer drugs and other medicines can also make your mouth dry.

What you can do

- Tell your doctor or nurse – they can give you mouthwashes, lozenges, artificial saliva sprays or gels to help.
- Keep a drink with you all the time and sip it often, including when you go to bed or go out. Have sips of water with your meals.
- Spray your mouth with cool water to keep it moist.
- Suck ice cubes or ice lollies.
- Use sauces and gravies to soften your food.
- Avoid chocolate, pastry, peanut butter and other dry foods if they are hard to eat.
- Try sugar-free chewing gum – this can sometimes increase saliva.
- Use lip balm or Vaseline® on dry lips.
- Tell your nurse if your tongue gets a white coating over it.

Taste changes

Cancer treatment can change your taste in different ways. These changes normally do not last for very long.

What you can do

- Use spices, herbs and seasoning to flavour food. But be careful if your mouth is sore as some spices and seasonings can make this worse.
- Try having sharp tasting foods, such as fresh fruit and fruit juice. Be careful if your mouth is sore though, as these may hurt your mouth.
- Cold foods may taste better than hot foods.
- Cold meats may taste better with pickle or chutney.
- If you have a metal taste in your mouth, use plastic knives, forks and spoons.
- Fish, chicken and egg meals may taste better when cooked or marinated in a sauce.
- If you have a metal taste when eating red meat, try white meat, fish, or vegetarian meals using beans and lentils.
- Try brushing your teeth before meals.

Chewing and swallowing problems

Some types of cancer and cancer treatments can cause problems with chewing and swallowing. Tell your doctor, nurse, speech and language therapist (SALT) or dietician if you have any problems swallowing. If drinking makes you cough, tell your doctor or nurse straight away.

What you can do

- Taking painkillers before meals may help if it hurts to chew or swallow. Your doctor can give you advice.
- Choose foods that are easy to swallow, such as scrambled egg or yoghurt.
- Soften foods with sauces or gravy.
- Cook food slowly for a long time to make it softer and blend it to make it easier to eat.
- Chop meat and vegetables into small pieces.
- Cut the crusts off bread.
- If you feel food is getting stuck in your throat, fizzy drinks can help.
- Some meal delivery companies have a choice of soft foods on their menu.
- If you find it hard to eat enough, there are food supplements that you can have as drinks in between meals.

Feeling sick, heartburn and indigestion

Feeling sick

Some cancer treatments and other medications, such as painkillers and antibiotics, can make you feel sick.. Problems like constipation and liver damage can also cause sickness.

Your cancer doctor can give you anti-sickness drugs to help with sickness. If this does not help, tell your doctor, as there are different types you can try.

What you can do

- Follow the instructions you are given about when and how to take the anti-sickness drugs.
- Dry foods, such as crackers or plain biscuits, can help you to feel less sick first thing in the morning.
- If possible, let someone else cook your meals. Sometimes the smell of cooking can make you feel sick.
- Avoid greasy, fatty or fried foods.
- Try to eat light foods such as thin soups.
- Have some fresh air around you when you eat.

- Sit up straight at the table to eat and stay like this for at least 30 minutes after eating.
- Food or drink with ginger in it can help.
- Some people find peppermint tea helps. Try adding a teaspoon of honey if you prefer a sweeter taste.
- Sipping a fizzy drink, such as lemonade, ginger ale or fizzy water may help.
- Try having drinks between meals rather than with your food
- Wear Sea Bands® on your wrists. You can get them from your pharmacy
- Relaxation techniques may help you feel less sick.

Let your doctor know if you have constipation, as this can make you feel sick. You may need some medicine to help.

Heartburn and indigestion

Some cancer treatments and other drugs can irritate the stomach. Heartburn is a burning feeling in the chest. Indigestion is an uncomfortable feeling in the upper part of the abdomen (tummy). It usually happens after meals.

What you can do

- Talk to your doctor, they can give you medicines to help.
- Make a note of foods that make you feel uncomfortable so you can avoid them.
- Avoid chocolate, alcohol, spicy food, fatty food and aniseed.
- Avoid large meals and eating late at night.
- Eat regular meals and eat slowly.
- Rest for 45–60 minutes after you eat. Try not to lie down after a meal.
- Wear loose clothing around your waist.
- Try to stay a healthy weight.
- If you smoke, try to stop or cut down.

Bowel changes that affect your diet

Constipation

This is when you find it difficult or painful to poo. Some cancer drugs and other medicines, such as painkillers and some anti-sickness drugs, can cause constipation. Talk to your doctor if you have constipation. They may give you medicines called laxatives.

What you can do

- Eat foods with lots of fibre in. These include fresh fruit and vegetables, wholemeal bread, flour and pasta, whole wheat cereal, muesli, oats, beans, lentils, peas and brown rice.
- Drink lots of fluids, both hot and cold drinks. Try to drink 2 litres each day (3½ pints). This is important if you are eating more fibre.
- Eating prunes and their juice, dried apricots or syrup of figs may help.
- Gentle exercise, such as walking, can help.

If you have bowel cancer, it is important to talk to your dietitian, doctor or nurse before changing your diet.

Diarrhoea

This is when you need to poo more often than normal, and the poo is softer than normal.

Many cancer treatments can cause diarrhoea. It can also be caused by medications such as antibiotics, or by having an infection. Diarrhoea can be a temporary, mild side effect or it can be more severe. Always tell your doctor if you have diarrhoea and if it gets worse.

If you have diarrhoea after surgery for bowel cancer, talk to your cancer doctor or nurse before changing your diet.

What you can do

- Drink lots of fluids (at least 2 litres or 3½ pints each day).
- Eat small meals more regularly, rather than having large meals.
- Eat light foods, such as fish, chicken, well-cooked eggs, white bread, pasta and rice.
- Eat your meals slowly
- Eat less fibre (such as cereals, raw fruits and vegetables).
- Avoid greasy and fatty foods such as chips and burgers.
- Avoid spicy foods.

If changing what you eat does not help with diarrhoea, you may need to have anti-diarrhoea tablets. It is important to take the tablets exactly as your doctor explains.

Sometimes diarrhoea can be severe. If you have diarrhoea more than 4 times in 24 hours, or have diarrhoea during the night, contact the hospital straight away.

Wind

Radiotherapy to the pelvis (lower tummy area) and some types of bowel surgery may cause wind. Some types of medicines, and having constipation can also cause wind.

If you find wind painful, or difficult to cope with, talk to your cancer doctor or nurse.

What you can do

- Eat and drink slowly. Take small mouthfuls and chew food well.
- Avoid beans, pulses, pickles, sweetcorn, onions and fizzy drinks.
- Try adding 2 teaspoons of peppermint water to a glass of warm water. You can sweeten it with honey. Or you could try peppermint tea.
- Your GP can give you peppermint capsules that may help.
- Charcoal tablets may help – you can get some from your pharmacy.
- Gentle exercise, especially walking, can help.
- Try to make sure you poo regularly – wind can be a sign of constipation.

Changes to your appetite and weight

If you find it hard to eat, or you are losing weight, it is important to talk to a dietitian. They can talk to you about ways to put on weight and avoid losing weight.

If you do not feel hungry (poor appetite)

During cancer treatment, you may lose your appetite and not feel hungry. This may be due to feeling sick, food and drink tasting different, or because you feel too tired. Here are some tips that may help:

- Eat smaller meals but have them more often.
- Keep snacks, such as crisps, nuts, dried fruit, cheese, crackers and yoghurt, with you for when you feel able to eat.
- Serve food on a small plate.
- Eat meals slowly, chew the food well and relax for some time after each meal.
- If you cannot eat a meal, you could have a fruit smoothie with yoghurt or ice cream. Or a milkshake or hot chocolate, made with full fat milk and some cream. (See food supplements below).
- Drinking a small amount of alcohol just before, or with, food can help your appetite. Check with your doctor that you can have alcohol.
- Your doctor may give you a medicine that can help increase your appetite.
- On days when your appetite is better, try to eat well and have your favourite foods.

If you have had treatment for bowel cancer, talk to your dietitian, cancer nurse or doctor about your diet.

Avoiding weight loss

If you are losing weight or finding it hard to eat, you can add extra calories (energy) and protein to your diet without having to eat more food.

- Add full-fat milk, syrup, honey or sugar to breakfasts and desserts

- Try adding cream or lentils, beans and noodles to casseroles and soups
- Grated cheese or olive oil can be added to hot soup
- Cream, cheese and butter can be added to mashed potatoes or sauces
- Use plenty of butter and add mayonnaise or salad cream in sandwiches
- Add peanut butter (or other nut spreads), chocolate spread, tahini, honey or jam to bread, toast, crackers and biscuits.

Food supplements

Your doctor may suggest that you have food supplements (nutritional supplements). These can add extra calories (energy) or protein to your diet. Some are drinks and others are powders that you add to food or drink. There are also some foods, such as ready-made puddings.

Your doctor or dietician may need to prescribe some supplements but others you can buy from the pharmacy or supermarket. You can ask your doctor or dietitian about food supplements. You should only use supplements if they recommend it.

If you have diabetes, you must get advice from your GP, cancer nurse or dietitian, before you use food supplements.

How Macmillan can help you

Macmillan is here to help you and your family. You can get support from:

- **The Macmillan Support Line (0808 808 00 00)**. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use. We can answer medical questions, give you information about financial support, or talk to you about your feelings. The phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm.
- **The Macmillan website (macmillan.org.uk)**. Our site has lots of English information about cancer and living with cancer. There is more information in other languages at macmillan.org.uk/translations
- **Information and support services**. At an information and support service, you can talk to a cancer support specialist and get written information. Find your nearest centre at macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres or call us. Your hospital might have a centre.
- **Local support groups** – At a support group you can talk to other people affected by cancer. Find a group near you at macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups or call us.
- **Macmillan Online Community** – You can also talk to other people affected by cancer online at macmillan.org.uk/community

Word list

Word	In English	How to say in English	Meaning
	Antibiotics		Medicine that treats an <u>infection</u> .
	Appetite		When you feel you want to eat food.
	Calories		Calories are the amount of energy contained in food. Your body needs energy from food to function.
	Chemotherapy		A cancer treatment that uses drugs to kill cancer cells.
	Constipation		When you find it difficult or painful to empty your bowels (poo). You might not be going as often as usual, or your poo might be hard and lumpy.
	Diabetes		A condition where the amount of sugar in the blood is too high because the body does not use it properly.
	Dietitian		An expert in food and nutrition. They can tell you which foods are best for you. They can also give you advice if you have problems with your diet.
	Digestion		How your body breaks down the food you eat and gets <u>nutrients</u> from it.
	Food supplements		Drinks, powders or foods that can be added to your diet to increase the amount of <u>calories</u> , <u>protein</u> or <u>nutrients</u> you are getting.
	Heartburn		Heartburn is a burning feeling in the chest. It can be very painful. It happens when acid from the stomach irritates the lining of your the <u>oesophagus</u>

			(food pipe).
	Immune system		Your immune system is your body's way of protecting you from harmful bacteria and <u>infections</u> .
	Indigestion		Pain or discomfort in the upper part of the tummy. It can happen when stomach acid irritates the lining of the stomach. It happens mostly after meals.
	Infection		When bacteria gets into your body and causes an illness.
	Low immunity		When your body's <u>immune system</u> is not working properly. It means you are more at risk of getting an <u>infection</u> .
	Nutrients		Substances in food that your body needs to keep working properly and stay healthy.
	Oesophagus		The tube that goes from the mouth in to the stomach. Food passes down it when you eat. It's also called the gullet or food pipe.
	Protein		A substance found in food that is important in a healthy diet. Our body needs protein to function, grow and repair itself.
	Radiotherapy		A cancer treatment that uses high-energy rays, such as x-rays, to kill cancer cells.
	Saliva		A liquid your body produces and releases into the mouth. It helps keep your mouth healthy and moist. It also helps with chewing, swallowing and <u>digestion</u> . It is also called spit.

	Salivary glands		Glands around the mouth that produce <u>saliva</u> .
	Speech and language therapist		Someone who can help if you have problems with speech and swallowing.
	Targeted therapy		A cancer treatment that uses drugs that target and attack cancer cells.

More information in other languages

We have information in other languages about these topics:

<p>Types of cancer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Breast cancer• Large bowel cancer• Lung cancer• Prostate cancer <p>Treatments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chemotherapy• Radiotherapy• Surgery	<p>Coping with cancer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you are diagnosed with cancer – a quick guide• Eating problems and cancer• End of life• Financial support – benefits• Financial support – help with costs• Healthy eating• Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer• Side effects of cancer treatment• What you can do to help yourself
---	---

To see this information, go to [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

Speak to us in another language

You can call Macmillan free on **0808 808 00 00** and speak to us in another language through an interpreter. Please tell us in English which language you need. You can talk to us about your worries and medical questions.

We are open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm.

References and thanks

This information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been translated into this language by a translation company.

The information included is based on the Macmillan booklet **Eating problems and cancer**. We can send you a copy, but the full booklet is only available in English.

This information has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by our Chief Medical Editor, Professor Tim Iveson, Consultant Medical Oncologist and Macmillan Chief Medical Editor.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this information.

All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, please contact us at cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk

MAC15753_Language

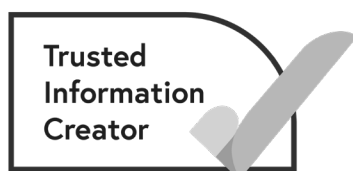
Content reviewed: 2020

Next planned review: 2023

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate but it should not be relied upon to reflect the current state of medical research, which is constantly changing. If you are concerned about your health, you should consult your doctor. Macmillan cannot accept liability for any loss or damage resulting from any inaccuracy in this information or third-party information such as information on websites to which we link.

© Macmillan Cancer Support 2020. Registered charity in England and Wales (261017), Scotland (SC039907) and the Isle of Man (604). Registered office 89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ.

MAC15753_Language



Patient Information Forum