

Healthy eating and cancer

This information is about how to eat well during and after cancer treatment. It explains why a healthy diet is important and what it should include. There are also ideas for simple changes you can make to improve your diet, and advice on food safety during cancer treatment.

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 or nurse 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:

- Why a healthy diet is important
- What is a healthy, balanced diet?
- Making changes to your diet
- Things you can do
- Using food labels
- Food safety during and after cancer treatment
- How Macmillan can help you
- Word list
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Why a healthy diet is important

Eating a healthy diet is one of the best things you can do for your health. Many people with cancer say that choosing to eat a healthy diet gives them back some feeling of control.

Eating well and keeping to a healthy diet will help you:

- keep to a healthy weight
- feel stronger
- to have more energy
- feel better.

Eating a healthy diet and keeping to a healthy weight can help reduce the risk of cancer. If you have already had cancer it can reduce the risk of a new cancer. It also reduces the risk of other diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and strokes.

Being overweight increases the risk of some types of cancer. There are many reasons why people are overweight, but an unhealthy diet and lack of physical activity are common reasons. Having a healthy, balanced diet and being active will help you keep to a healthy weight.

Some cancer treatments can cause weight gain, such as hormonal therapy or steroids. If this happens, try to keep your weight within the normal range for your height.

Your GP or practice nurse can tell you what your ideal weight is. If you are worried about your weight, ask your GP or a dietitian for advice.

What is a healthy, balanced diet?

Food contains nutrients that our bodies need. A healthy, balanced diet gives you all the nutrients you need to keep your body working well.

For most people, a healthy diet includes:

- Lots of fruit and vegetables – These give you vitamins, minerals and fibre. Different types and colours of fruit and vegetables have different nutrients so try to eat lots of different ones.
- Lots of starchy foods (carbohydrates) – These give you energy, fibre, iron and B vitamins. Foods include wholemeal bread, rice, pasta, noodles, couscous and potatoes.
- Some protein – Your body needs protein to function, grow and repair itself. Foods include lean meat, poultry, fish, nuts, eggs and pulses (beans and lentils). There are also plant-based meat alternatives such as tofu, soya or mycoprotein (Quorn).
- Some milk and dairy – Foods include cheese and yoghurt.

- A small amount of fat, salt and sugar.

The diagram below shows how much of each food you should have.



Try to eat less processed meat and red meat. Avoid 'fast food' restaurants, these foods usually contain a lot of fat.

Fibre

Try to eat a variety of foods with fibre. Fibre is the part of cereals, fruit and vegetables that is not digested and passes down into the gut. Fibre helps keep your bowels healthy and prevents constipation.

Foods high in fibre include:

- wholemeal, seeded or granary bread, wholemeal chapatis and pitas
- wholegrain cereals and pasta
- brown rice
- yams and potatoes with their skin on
- peas, beans, lentils, grains, oats and seeds
- fruit and vegetables.

Fat

Eat a small amount of fat and choose unsaturated fats, such as vegetable-based cooking oils and spreads, nuts, seeds, oily fish and avocados.

Avoid saturated fats, such as butter, ghee, coconut oil, chips, pies, cakes and pastries. Eat less fried foods and less fatty cuts of meat.

Salt

Try to have no more than 6 grams (1 teaspoon) of salt each day. Eating more than this can increase your blood pressure and your risk of some types of cancer, heart disease and stroke. Try not to add salt to your food. You could use herbs, spices or black pepper for flavour instead. It is not just the salt you add to your food that counts. Some foods already contain high levels of salt, so it is important to check the food labels.

Sugar

Sugar gives us energy. It is found naturally in some food and drinks, such as fruit and milk.

But many foods contain added sugar, such as sweets, biscuits, cakes, pastries and puddings. Fizzy drinks and alcohol often contain a lot of sugar too. Try to avoid foods and drinks with added sugar.

Drinks

Drinks should be mainly water, or tea and coffee (without sugar). Try to drink at least 2 litres (3½ pints) of fluids each day.

If you drink fizzy drinks, cola or squash, try to have less and have the sugar-free types instead. Try to limit the amount of fruit juice you drink, it has lots of sugar in it.

Alcohol

Alcohol contains lots of calories and can make you gain weight. Alcohol may also increase the risk of some cancers.

Following recommended drinking guidelines is good for your health and weight. Government guidelines suggest that you should:

- not regularly drink more than 14 units of alcohol in a week
- spread the alcohol units you drink in a week over 3 or more days
- try to have several days each week where you do not drink.

Number of calories and units of alcohol per drink

Drink	Units of alcohol	Calories (energy)
Pint of lager	2	170 to 250
Standard glass of white wine (175ml)	2	130 to 160
Single vodka (25ml) with a mixer	1	115

Calories

Food and drinks give you energy. The amount of energy is measured in calories. On food labels, you will see this written as kcal. If you eat or drink more calories (energy) than your body needs, the body stores the extra calories as fat. Guidelines suggest that:

- Men eat no more than 2,500 calories per day.
- Women eat no more than 2,000 calories per day.

As people get older, they need even less calories.

Making changes to your diet

It can be difficult to make changes to your diet when you are already coping with cancer and cancer treatment. Some people eat more when life is stressful. This is called comfort eating. Others are so busy that they do not have time to look for healthier options when food shopping. But some people find improving their diet is a positive change they can make in their life.

You can make changes to your diet slowly, when you feel ready. It doesn't have to be expensive. Healthy foods like beans, lentils and some vegetables are cheap ingredients to use.

Try writing down what you eat for a few weeks, and then compare this with the information in these pages. Then you can look for small changes you can make to improve your diet. Making changes can be enjoyable. You may discover new foods that you have not tried before.

Before making any big changes to your diet, talk to your doctor or nurse. They can refer you to a dietitian, who can give you expert advice about changing your diet.

Things you can do

- Only eat as much food as you need. Your doctor or dietitian can give you advice on portion sizes.
- Try to eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables each day. Try having some fruit with your breakfast. Add a side dish of salad or roasted vegetables to your meals. They should make up a third of what you eat in a day.
- Eat less sugar and fat. Choose healthy snacks such as fruit and nuts, rather than crisps and biscuits.
- Eat less red meat and processed meat, such as sausages, burgers and pies. If you make stews or curries, add more vegetables and less meat.
- It's important to keep active along with eating a healthy diet. Even just short walks, housework or gardening will improve your fitness.

Using food labels

Many packaged foods use a traffic light system on their labels. The label shows how much sugar, fat and salt it contains:

- red means high
- amber means medium
- green means low.

Eat more foods with green and amber labels, and less foods with red labels.

	Sugars	Fats	Saturates	Salt
High (per 100g)	Over 22.5g	Over 17.5g	Over 5g	Over 1.5g
Medium (per 100g)	Over 5g to 22.5g	Over 3g to 17.5g	Over 1.5g to 5g	Over 0.3g to 1.5g
Low (per 100g)	5g or under	3g or under	1.5g or under	0.3g or under

Food safety during and after cancer treatment

If you are having cancer treatment, your immune system may be weaker. This means your body is less able to fight infection and you are more at risk of food poisoning. You may also be less able to cope with the symptoms of food poisoning.

Tips to reduce the risk of food poisoning

- use fresh ingredients
- use foods before the use-by date on the packaging
- store food and drinks at the correct temperature (follow instructions on the packaging)
- rinse all fruit and vegetables well in cold running water
- cook food thoroughly
- throw away mouldy food.

In the kitchen you should:

- wash your hands before you touch food
- clean cooking utensils and chopping boards thoroughly
- wipe worktops with hot, soapy water or an antibacterial spray, especially after preparing raw meat or eggs
- wash or replace dishcloths and tea towels regularly
- keep pets out of the kitchen.

Foods to avoid if your immune system is low

If your immune system is very low, you will need to avoid certain foods. Your doctor, nurse or dietitian will tell you if you need to avoid any foods. These may include:

- unpasteurised milk, cream or yoghurt
- cheese made from unpasteurised milk (usually soft cheeses, such as Brie, and blue cheeses, such as Stilton)
- all types of paté
- yoghurt or yoghurt drinks that contain probiotics
- raw meat or seafood
- runny eggs and foods with raw eggs (homemade mayonnaise).

Storing, freezing and reheating food

If you decide to keep food to eat later, let it cool down completely before storing it in the fridge or freezer.

If you feel able to, you could make extra portions and freeze them before treatment. This means you have meals that are quick to make when you need them.

Remember to defrost your food properly before reheating it. There are instructions on the packaging about how to freeze and defrost food. It is especially important to be careful if you have low immunity due to cancer treatment.

You should only reheat food once. When you reheat it, make sure it gets very hot, even in the middle. You can let it cool down before eating it. Be careful not to burn your mouth if you reheat food. Do not reheat cooked rice, eat it as soon as it's cooked.

Eating out

It is best to avoid eating out if you have low immunity. If you do eat out, eat somewhere where you know the food is freshly made and make sure it is thoroughly cooked.

Avoid buying food from salad bars, buffets and street vendors, as it is difficult to know how fresh the food is. Also avoid having ice-cream from an ice-cream van.

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
	Constipation		When you find it difficult or painful to poo (pass stools).
	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 any problems with your diet.
	Food poisoning		An illness caused by eating food that contains bacteria. It can cause nausea and vomiting.
	Hormonal therapy		A type of treatment for cancer that some people may have.
	Immune system		Your immune system is your body's way of protecting you from harmful bacteria and fighting off <u>infections</u> .
	Infection		When bacteria gets into your body and causes an illness.
	Nutrients		Substances that your body needs to keep working properly and stay healthy.
	Probiotics		Live bacteria or yeast that might be in some yoghurts or yoghurt drinks.
	Steroids		A medicine that some people may have as part of their cancer treatment.
	Unpasteurised		This means the harmful bacteria in a food or drink has not been destroyed.

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
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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 **Healthy eating 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**

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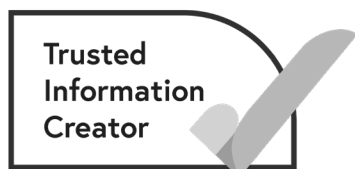
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