



Healthy eating and cancer: English

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.

If you have any questions about this information, ask your cancer team 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 this language on our website. Visit macmillan.org.uk/translations

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Why is a healthy diet 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.

A healthy diet will help you to:

- keep to a healthy weight
- feel stronger
- 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, such as hormonal therapy or steroids, can cause weight gain. 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. Dietitians are experts in food and nutrition.

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 work properly, and to 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 dairy.** Foods include milk, cheese and yoghurt.
- **A small amount of fat, salt and sugar.** Foods include oils and spreads.

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



Fibre

Try to eat lots of different foods with fibre. Fibre is the part of cereals, fruit and vegetables that is not digested, and passes down into the gut (small intestine).

Fibre helps keep your bowels healthy and prevents constipation. Constipation is when you find it difficult or painful to poo.

Foods high in fibre include:

- wholemeal, seeded or granary bread, wholemeal chapatis and pittas
- 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 food and less fatty cuts of meat.

Salt

Try to have no more than 6 grams (1 teaspoon) of salt each day. Too much salt 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 because 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 (energy). On food labels, you will see this written as kcal. If you eat or drink more calories 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 fewer 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. Fruit and vegetables 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.
- Avoid 'fast food' restaurants – these foods usually contain a lot of fat.

Using food labels

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

- 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 is called having low immunity. Your immune system is your body's way of protecting you. When you have low immunity, 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 immunity is 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. In unpasteurised foods, harmful bacteria have not been destroyed
- cheese made from unpasteurised milk (usually soft cheeses, such as Brie, and blue cheeses, such as Stilton)
- all types of pâté
- yoghurt or yoghurt drinks that contain probiotics (live bacteria or yeast)
- raw meat or seafood
- runny eggs and foods with raw eggs (such as 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.

Getting the right care and support for you

If you have cancer and do not speak English, you may be worried that this will affect your cancer treatment and care. But your healthcare team should offer you care, support and information that meets your needs.

We know that sometimes people may have extra challenges in getting the right support. For example, if you work or have a family you might also have worries about money and transport costs. All of this can be stressful and hard to cope with.

How Macmillan can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we are here to support you.

Macmillan Support Line

We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

Our expert advisers on the Macmillan Support Line can help with medical questions or be there to listen if you need someone to talk to. We can also talk to you about your money worries and recommend other useful organisations that can help. The free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan website

Our website has lots of information in English about cancer. There is also more information in other languages at macmillan.org.uk/translations

We may also be able to arrange translations just for you. Email informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk to tell us what you need.

Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. Visit one to get the information you need and speak with someone face to face. Find your nearest centre at macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Local support groups

At a support group, you can talk to other people affected by cancer. Find out about support groups in your area at macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan Online Community

You can also talk to other people affected by cancer online at macmillan.org.uk/community

You can access it at any time of day or night. You can share your experiences, ask questions, or just read people's posts.

More information in your language

We have information in your language about these topics:

Signs and symptoms of cancer

- Signs and symptoms cards

If you are diagnosed with cancer

- Cancer care in the UK
- Healthcare for refugees and people seeking asylum
- If you are diagnosed with cancer

Types of cancer

- Bowel cancer
- Breast cancer
- Cervical cancer
- Lung cancer
- Prostate cancer

Treatment for cancer

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Sepsis and cancer
- Side effects of cancer treatment
- Surgery

Living with cancer

- Claiming benefits when you have cancer
- Eating problems and cancer
- Healthy eating
- Help with costs when you have cancer
- LGBTQ+ people and cancer
- Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer

End of life

- End of life

To see this information, go to macmillan.org.uk/translations

For more support to understand information, go to macmillan.org.uk/understandinginformation

References and thanks

This information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been translated professionally.

The information included is based on our Diet and cancer content available in English on our website.

This information has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by members of Macmillan's Centre of Clinical Expertise or other senior clinicians or experts.

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

informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk

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