



Eating problems and cancer: English

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

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](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

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How cancer and cancer treatments 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 team, nurse or GP if you have problems with eating. They can give you advice and support and they can refer you to a dietitian. Dietitians are qualified health professionals. They are experts in giving information and advice about food and food supplements.

Risk of infection (low immunity)

Cancer and cancer treatments can sometimes affect your immune system. This is called having low immunity. It means you are more at risk of getting an infection. An infection is an illness caused by germs.

Most people will not need to change their diet but your doctor may ask you to avoid foods that can contain harmful bacteria. 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 your language in the fact sheet 'Healthy eating.' Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.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 3 big meals.
- Try a nourishing drink, with fruit (fresh or frozen) blended with milk, fruit juice, ice cream or yoghurt.
- Your doctor, nurse or dietitian may prescribe supplement drinks that add extra energy or protein (or both) to your diet.
- If you need help at home with cooking or eating, tell your GP or dietitian. They may be able to arrange for meals to be delivered to your home, or someone to help prepare meals at home.

Looking after your mouth

Some cancer treatments can make your mouth or throat sore or dry. They may also cause a mouth infection and taste changes. Any mouth problems usually temporary but can sometimes be permanent. It is very important to look after your mouth during treatment.

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 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.
- Follow any advice from your doctor or nurse about how to care for your mouth.

Mouth and throat problems

Sore mouth

Some cancer treatments can make your mouth or throat sore.

What you can do

- If you have a sore mouth, tell your doctor or nurse. They can check if you have a mouth infection.
- Your doctor can prescribe an anaesthetic gel or mouthwash if needed. Check with your 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.
- 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 soothe 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.

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.
- Avoid alcohol and try to limit drinks with caffeine in.
- Spray your mouth with cool water to keep it moist.
- Suck ice cubes or ice lollies.
- Use sauces and gravies, mayonnaise, butter or extra oil 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. You may need treatment for this.

Taste changes

Cancer treatment can change your taste and you may no longer enjoy certain foods or find all food tastes the same. These changes do not normally 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 when eating red meat, try white meat, fish, or vegetarian meals using beans and lentils.
- It may also help a metal taste in your mouth if you use plastic, wood or bamboo knives, forks and spoons.
- Fish, chicken and egg meals may taste better when cooked or marinated in a sauce.
- If you no longer like tea or coffee, try fruit or herbal teas, milk or a cold drink.
- 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 (SLT) or dietitian if you have any problems swallowing. If drinking makes you cough, tell your doctor or nurse straight away.

What you can do

- Taking painkillers 30 minutes 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, tofu or yoghurt or custard.
- 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. Your doctor or dietitian can explain which might be best for you.

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 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.
- Try eating in a room where there is plenty of fresh air.
- Sit up straight at the table to eat and stay like this for a short time after eating.
- Food or drinks containing ginger or peppermint can help with nausea. You could try ginger or peppermint tea, crystallised ginger, or ginger biscuits.
- 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 acupressure Sea Bands® on your wrists. The bands apply pressure to your wrist. This is thought to change the communication pathways between the brain and stomach that cause nausea and vomiting. You can get them from your pharmacy. Ask your doctor or nurse before using them.
- Relaxation techniques and breathing exercises may help you feel less sick.

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

Heartburn and indigestion

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. This may be due to a cancer treatment or another drug irritating the lining of the stomach.

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 fizzy drinks and chewing gum.
- If you get indigestion at night, avoid eating a meal or drinking tea or coffee for 3 to 4 hours before you go to bed.
- A glass of milk or some yoghurt may relieve symptoms.
- Avoid large meals and eating late at night. Instead, try to eat small meals regularly 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

Constipation means that you are not able to poo as often as you normally do. It can become difficult or painful for you 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.
- Try gentle exercise, such as walking.

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. If you have a stoma, it may be more active than usual. A stoma is an opening that is made through the tummy (abdominal) wall. It connects the bowel to the surface of the tummy.

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 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 3 large meals a day.
- 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) until diarrhoea improves.
- 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, and if anti-diarrhoea medication has not worked in this time, or if you have diarrhoea during the night contact the hospital straight away.

Wind

Wind can make you feel bloated and make you pass gas. It can be caused by:

- Radiotherapy to the pelvis (lower tummy area)
- Some types of bowel surgery.
- Some types of medicines
- Having constipation.

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

What you can do

- Eat and drink slowly. Take small mouthfuls and chew food well.
- Avoid beans, pulses, pickles, cabbage, broccoli 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.
- Have nourishing drinks as well as small meals. You could have a fruit smoothie with yoghurt or ice cream. Or a milkshake made with full fat milk and some cream.
- 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 as well as you can and enjoy 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. 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. You can add them to your everyday foods or have them in addition to your normal diet. In some situations, supplements can be used to replace meals.

There are also some supplement-based foods, such as ready-made puddings.

Your doctor or dietitian 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. It is important to follow the advice of your doctor or dietitian when using high-protein or high-energy supplements.

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

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**](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

We may also be able to arrange translations just for you. Email [**informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk**](mailto: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**](https://www.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](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

For more support to understand information, go to
[macmillan.org.uk/understandinginformation](https://www.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.

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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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