Eating well when eating becomes difficult
Support your health during cancer treatment

In partnership with

This booklet was funded by Macmillan Cancer Support and produced in partnership with Penny Brohn UK and Specialist Registered Dietitians based at Weston Area Health Trust, North Bristol NHS Trust and University Hospitals Bristol.
Eating well when eating becomes difficult
Support your health during cancer treatment

Contents

Introduction 4

1. Coping with a small appetite 7

2. Fatigue 11

3. Symptoms and side-effects associated with the mouth 21
   Thrush in the mouth 23
   Sore mouth 24
   Dry mouth 26
   Swallowing difficulties 30
   Taste changes 32
   Nausea/feeling sick 34

4. Symptoms and side-effects associated with the bowel 37
   Constipation 38
   Diarrhoea 40
   Tenesmus* 42

Conclusion 44

Useful resources 47

*Tenesmus is a constant feeling of needing a bowel movement that's common after some types of radiotherapy
Introduction

This booklet aims to address some of the common difficulties that people may experience with eating during cancer treatment.

Inside you’ll find information on the common effects of chemotherapy, radiotherapy/brachytherapy, immunotherapy and hormonal therapy.

The information provided may be useful as first-line advice, but should not replace specialist advice from your healthcare team. Many people have other medical conditions alongside a cancer diagnosis which may affect what they eat. Specialist advice from your healthcare team may be needed if you have more complex nutritional needs.

Where possible, try to eat as healthily as you can (see Eating well during cancer treatment), however there may be times when supporting your health and coping with cancer or treatment-related side-effects means that you need to adjust the way that you eat.
It may become difficult to manage high fibre or wholegrain foods, or if you have a poor appetite or are losing weight, you may need to eat fewer vegetables/fruits/wholegrains, and focus more on foods which contain protein and calories from fats and carbohydrates to meet your body’s needs.

You may be able to get these from healthier choices like nuts, fish, lean meat, avocados, plant/nut oils and full fat dairy products, but there may be times when you need to choose foods which contain higher quantities of saturated (less healthy) fat, refined (white) carbohydrates, and/or added sugar.

To guide you with this, foods which often contain higher quantities of saturated fat and/or added sugar are shown in *italics*. Have a look at food labels too for more information, as branded and non-branded products will vary.
Eating well when eating becomes difficult
Coping with a small appetite

Loss of appetite during cancer treatment is very common and can be related to the physical effects of certain cancers, or the side-effects of your treatment.
When your appetite is low you may need to make different food choices to usual. When you’re eating less, it’s important to make sure what you do eat is as high in nutrients, calories (energy), and protein as possible. This can help to avoid weight loss and help you feel as well as you can. Suggestions are provided below to help you do this.

**Try to focus on eating:**
Small meals, with planned snacks or nourishing drinks in between.

**High energy foods**
- Nuts/nut butters and seeds/seed butters
- Avocados
- Full fat dairy products e.g. *milk, cheese, yoghurt*
- Plant based oils e.g. *olive oil, coconut oil*
- *Butter/spread/ghee*
- *Cream, crème fraîche, ice cream, coconut milk.*

**High protein foods**
- Meat, poultry and fish
- Vegetarian protein sources such as *Quorn™* or soya based products including soya milk and tofu
- Beans and pulses
- Nuts/nut butters
- *Dairy products e.g. milk, yoghurt, cheese*
- Eggs.
Nourishing drinks

- *Whole milk (blue top) or Jersey milk (gold top)*
- Milkshakes (can be homemade from fruit blended with *whole milk* and/or *yoghurt*)
- Soya drinks
- Fruit juices/smoothies
- Add milk powder, ground almonds, pea protein powder, *cream or coconut milk* to other drinks
- *Cocoa/hot chocolate/malted drinks.*

Weight loss

If you’re unable to maintain your weight during cancer treatment you may benefit from further support from your healthcare team. They may prescribe high calorie/protein nutritional supplement drinks or products to help you meet your nutritional needs. There are many varieties available on prescription, and some can be purchased from supermarkets or pharmacies e.g. Complan™/Meritene™ or non-branded equivalents. Speak to your healthcare team if you feel that you’re relying on these heavily.
Eating well when eating becomes difficult
Fatigue

Fatigue can make food shopping, meal preparation and eating more difficult. Eating a nutritious diet which includes plenty of vegetables and fruit, protein, carbohydrates (wholegrain where possible), and healthy fats can be an important step towards improving your energy levels.
Food shopping and preparation

- Take friends or family up on any offers to help with food shopping or preparation. They can help you prepare healthy, balanced meals to eat or keep in the fridge or freezer for another time.

- Make the most of times when you have more energy to plan meals, or batch cook. Freeze individual portions for later.*

- Smaller portions, eaten more frequently, can be easier to manage.

- Opt for foods that require minimal preparation.

- Eat when you feel like it, even if this differs from your normal eating pattern.

- Soft, moist foods require less chewing and therefore can be easier to eat. See the lists of soft moist foods and meal ideas in the later sections on sore mouth and dry mouth.

- Most supermarkets offer an online home delivery service.
Some companies offer recipe boxes with all the ingredients needed to prepare a meal.

Ready-prepared/frozen meals* can be delivered by a supermarket or a specialist company. There are wide ranges available, and many include healthier options to suit all budgets. Local voluntary organisations may also be available in your area.

*Check food safety precautions around freezing
Examples of organisations/companies which provide a meal delivery service include:

**Meals on Wheels**
Check with your local authority  
www.gov.uk/meals-home

**Wiltshire Farm Foods©**
0800 0773100  
www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com

**Oak House Foods©**
0333 3706700  
www.oakhousefoods.co.uk

**COOK©**
01732 759010  
www.cookfood.net

**EatFirst©**
0203 308 9339  
www.eatfirst.com

Please note that other services may be available in your local area or online.
Store cupboard and freezer ideas

Using items which can be kept in the kitchen store cupboard or freezer can help simplify meal and snack preparation. Some foods are available pre-portioned for ease of preparation.

Check food safety precautions around freezing food.

Breakfast

Store cupboard ideas:
- Wholegrain breakfast cereals
- Individual porridge pots/sachets
- Tinned fruit (preferably in natural juice), add to ground seeds/nuts and yoghurt
- Cartons of long life fruit juice or smoothies, try adding some protein with ground seeds or nuts
- Tinned beans
- Ready made pasta sauce – add an egg and cook in the oven to make a quick Shakshuka.
**Eating well when eating becomes difficult**

**Freezer ideas:**
- Frozen fruit/smoothie mix – thaw and combine with yoghurt
- Sliced wholemeal bread for toasting.

**Main meals and/or side dishes**

**Store cupboard ideas:**
- Pulses (lentils, peas and beans e.g. butterbeans, baked, cannellini and kidney beans)
- Tinned nourishing soups with beans/meat/fish
- Tinned fish or meat
- Tinned stews, curries, casseroles, goulash, chilli
- Dried or vacuum packed rice, couscous, quinoa, lentils, pearl barley, polenta
- Vacuum packs of tortellini/gnocchi/ravioli
- Vegetables in oil or brine e.g. sundried tomatoes, peppers and olives
- Tinned vegetables
- Part-baked products e.g. wholemeal bread rolls
- Crackers, crispbread, oatcakes, rice cakes.
Freezer ideas:
- Fish or meat, cooked and portioned
- Quorn™ products
- Ready made meals e.g. fish or cottage pie; meat, fish or lentil curries
- Boil in the bag meals e.g. fish in sauce
- Risotto or paella
- Pasta bake with meat, fish, vegetables
- Vegetables (can be frozen in individual microwavable portions)
- Bread, rolls, garlic bread and pittas
- Frozen sweet potato oven chips
- Frozen mashed or small cooked whole potatoes
- Individual microwavable rice portions.
Desserts/snacks

Store cupboard ideas:
- ✔️ Long life yoghurts (make sure these have a long date left on them when you buy them)
- ✔️ Long life smoothies or fruit juice
- ✔️ Nuts and seeds
- ✔️ Dried fruit
- ✔️ Crackers, crispbread, oatcakes, rice cakes
- ✔️ Cereal bars, energy balls and energy bars
- ✔️ Breadsticks, cheese twists
- ✔️ Rice pudding, custard, jelly, biscuits, cake bars.

Freezer ideas:
- ✔️ Fruit e.g. mixed berries, stewed fruits, smoothie mix
- ✔️ Frozen avocado portions
- ✔️ Frozen desserts e.g. crumble, torte, profiteroles, cheesecake, gateaux, sponge puddings, tarts
- ✔️ Ice cream/sorbet.
Freezer ideas:
Many fresh herbs and spices are suitable for freezing e.g. rosemary, parsley, sage, dill, garlic and coriander and some can be bought ready frozen.

Condiments

Store cupboard ideas:
- Nut butters e.g. peanut/almond/cashew
- Pesto, passata or pasta sauce in jars
- Dried herbs and spices e.g. chilli, paprika and mixed Italian herbs add great flavour to simple homemade dishes
- Spice jars or pastes e.g. garlic, chilli, harissa, ginger
- Jam/marmalade/fruit curd/honey.

Freezer ideas:
- Many fresh herbs and spices are suitable for freezing e.g. rosemary, parsley, sage, dill, garlic and coriander and some can be bought ready frozen.
Symptoms and side-effects associated with the mouth

Being unwell, receiving medical treatment and taking medications can sometimes lead to problems affecting your mouth. You may notice a sore or dry mouth, or your taste can sometimes change. These can all affect what you choose to eat.
The information within this section aims to help you manage these symptoms and side-effects by adjusting what you eat. Different things work for different people, so only carry on with a change to your diet if you’re finding it helpful.

It’s very important that you tell your healthcare team if you have any troubling symptoms or side-effects so that they can be managed appropriately. Your doctors may be able to adjust your medication to help. Managing symptoms and side-effects will support you to eat well and enjoy your food.
Thrush in the mouth

Thrush is a common cause of symptoms and side-effects affecting the mouth during cancer treatment. It’s easy to treat, so it’s important to get this checked if you’re concerned.

Thrush is a fungal infection (candida) that can affect the mouth (oral thrush) particularly if your immunity is low. If you have thrush in your mouth you may notice a variety of symptoms – these are listed below. If it’s left untreated, the symptoms will persist and may cause further problems. Your mouth will continue to feel uncomfortable which can make eating and drinking more difficult.

Symptoms can include:
- Painful, burning sensation in the mouth
- Loss of taste or an unpleasant taste
- White patches in the mouth that can often be wiped off, leaving behind red areas that may bleed slightly
- Redness inside the mouth and throat and cracks at the corners of the mouth.

Oral thrush is’nt contagious. Let your healthcare team know if you think you have oral thrush as it can easily be treated with anti-fungal medication which they can prescribe.
Sore mouth

Problem foods and drinks to avoid

✗ Dry and rough foods like biscuits/rice cakes/toast can be scratchy and difficult to eat
✗ Acidic foods like citrus fruits, fruit juices or tomatoes can sting the mouth
✗ Salty, spicy, and pickled foods can be painful to eat (consider reducing the amount of seasoning in savoury dishes).

Soothing foods and drinks

✓ Opt for bland foods and drinks
✓ Let hot food and drinks cool down as they can be painful
✓ Opt for colder food and drinks
  ● Eat cold yoghurt or drink cold milk based drinks
  ● Suck ice cubes or lollies
  ● Add ice to drinks
  ● Ice cream or sorbet that’s not too acidic e.g. apple, mango or pear can be a pleasant dessert.
**Utensils**
- If you find drinking painful try using a straw
- Use a teaspoon to help avoid food coming into contact with sore parts of your mouth.

**Soft moist foods**
- Moisten savoury foods with sauce, gravy or *mayonnaise*
- Moisten sweet foods with *yoghurt/blended fruit/fruit compote/cream/custard/ice cream*
- Further ideas can be found on page 28.

**Talk to your healthcare team about mouthwashes or painkillers that may help.**
Dry mouth

Tips for easier eating and drinking:

- Take frequent sips of fluid to help keep your mouth moist.
- Ensure a good fluid intake – most people need around six–eight glasses/mugs (1.5–2 litres) of fluid each day, but this can vary. Normally, the colour of your urine is the best indicator. It should be a pale yellow colour if you are drinking enough.
- Stimulate saliva production by:
  - Chewing gum (sugar free) or sucking ice cubes, ice lollies made with fruit juice, or sweets
  - Adding citrus juice to drinks, eating pineapple chunks (be cautious if you also have a sore mouth).
- Cut food up small so that less chewing is needed.
- Choose soft moist food (see page 28 for soft moist food ideas)
- Avoid alcohol and very hot drinks, these can make symptoms worse.
Support your health during cancer treatment

Mouth care:

- **Brush your teeth and mouth regularly using fluoride toothpaste.**
- **Use a small water spray to moisten your mouth regularly.**
- **Use a lip balm to help prevent and protect lips from cracking and becoming sore.**
- **Avoid mouthwash that contains alcohol or glycerine as this can make symptoms worse.**

Talk to your healthcare team about trying a moisturising mouth gel or an artificial saliva spray.
Soft moist food ideas

Meal, side dish and snack ideas

- Cereals soaked in cold or warm milk, porridge
- Scrambled or poached eggs, omelette
- Soup
- Small pieces of tender meat/poultry/fish/Quorn™/tofu served with a gravy or sauce e.g. casserole/stew/goulash.curry
- Meat/fish/vegetable pies or dishes topped with mashed potatoes e.g. cottage pie/fish pie/moussaka. Add extra sauce/gravy to moisten if needed
- Well-cooked pulses (lentils, peas and beans) e.g. baked beans with a sauce, dhal or hummus
- Couscous/quinoa, with a dressing or sauce
- Rice dishes with sauce/risotto
- Soft noodles/gnocchi with a sauce
- Pasta with a sauce e.g. macaroni cheese or pasta bake
- Soft well-cooked vegetables
- Polenta
- Boiled/baked potatoes or sweet potatoes (without the skins) mashed with milk/soft cheese/cream/ crème fraîche/butter/margarine.
Dessert ideas

- Tinned/stewed/soft fruit/fruit compote
- Jelly
- Milk puddings e.g. rice pudding/yoghurt/mousse/custard
- Ice cream/sorbet
- Other desserts may be moistened with any of the suggestions above, or crème fraîche/cream.
Swallowing difficulties

Difficulty with swallowing can arise particularly after radiotherapy to the head, neck and chest area.

Tips for when swallowing is difficult:

- Chose soft/moist/smooth foods – (see page 28 for soft moist food ideas)
  - A food processor, hand blender or liquidiser can be used to alter the consistency of foods if needed.
  - When blending food, add fluid to achieve an appropriate consistency. It’s better to use nutritious fluids such as gravy, sauces, milk or custards rather than just water.

- Sip fluids between mouthfuls.

- Remove skins and stalks from fruits/vegetables. Avoid or sieve varieties containing pips and seeds e.g. frozen berries.

- Remove crusts from bread and opt for non-seeded varieties.

- Try to take your time, chew food well, and have small portions more frequently.

- Avoid rough, fibrous, lumpy, hard or crunchy foods that are difficult to swallow.
If you’ve been given specific advice from your medical team, dietitian or speech therapist please continue to follow this.
Taste changes

Most people experience taste changes particularly if they’re undergoing chemotherapy. Dealing with these changes requires patience and willingness to experiment with different flavours and combinations of food and drinks.

It’s important to ensure that you brush your teeth and mouth regularly using fluoride toothpaste. Choose plastic or bamboo cutlery if you have a metallic taste in your mouth.

If you have an unpleasant taste in your mouth you may find sipping drinks such as lemon juice/cordial in water, herbal tea or fizzy drinks refreshing. Chewing gum or sucking mints/ sweets may also be helpful. Strong flavours can also be helpful to overcome an unpleasant taste or lack of taste e.g. curried/marinated foods or strong cheeses. Using herbs, spices, chilli or garlic can be an easy way to give extra flavour to dishes. Dressings, vinegars or sauces can be added to foods to improve their flavour also. Hot/warm foods are easier to taste than cold foods.
Sharp foods such as citrus fruits (lemon/lime/grapefruit), berries, pineapple or rhubarb can help to stimulate the taste buds and saliva production which can help freshen the mouth. Fruit puree or compote can be added to sweet foods to enhance their taste. Be careful if your mouth is also sore, as spicy/sharp food and drinks may make this worse.

Cold, smooth and moist foods can be soothing for a sore mouth – check the soft moist food ideas on page 28 for more information.
Nausea

If nausea and vomiting is caused by medical treatment, your doctor may need to prescribe anti-sickness medication. These medicines work in different ways so it may take time to find the right one for you.

Let your healthcare team know if the medicines you’ve been prescribed aren’t working well for you.

Some dietary changes may be helpful:

**General tips:**
- Keep your mouth clean, moist and fresh
- Try a dry snack early in the morning such as toast or a plain cracker or *biscuit* to settle your stomach
- Try eating something every two to three hours, some people find that going for long periods without eating can make nausea worse
- Eat in relaxed surroundings, anxiety can worsen symptoms
- Sit up and stay sat up for a short time after eating
- Ginger or peppermint can help to settle the stomach (try chopped fresh ginger or fresh mint and a slice of lemon in hot water, *ginger ale*, *ginger beer*, *ginger biscuits*, or sucking mints).
Foods that may make nausea worse are:

- Fatty or rich foods including fried foods
- Spicy foods
- Foods with strong smells can also make symptoms worse:
  - Open a window to allow fresh air in the room where you eat
  - Set up your eating area away from where food is cooked and served and close any doors to minimise food smells
  - Let someone else cook or try using ready prepared meals so you’re not surrounded by cooking smells before eating.

If you’re feeling nauseous you may need to change your normal approach to eating. This may involve some experimenting to see what you’re able to tolerate.

Generally, many people find that colder foods are better tolerated as they produce less smell. Other common preferences include dry, salty or plain foods.

Please let your healthcare team know if your symptoms continue. Often a change in medication can help prevent or reduce nausea.
Symptoms and side-effects associated with the bowel
Constipation

Some painkillers, anti-sickness medication, and chemotherapy drugs can cause constipation. Sometimes prescribed laxatives are needed.

Gentle exercise, in addition to ensuring that you drink enough fluid, can also help. Aim for six–eight glasses/mugs (1.5–2 litres) each day. Any drinks count except alcoholic drinks, which can dehydrate the body and may worsen constipation.

Caffeine, for example in tea, coffee and some fizzy drinks can sometimes have a mild laxative effect. Increasing the amount of fibre that you eat can also help with constipation. Inform your healthcare team if you remain constipated after trying these measures.

A food product is classed as high fibre if it contains 6g or more of fibre per 100g. If it contains at least 3g of fibre per 100g, it’s considered to be a source of fibre. You can find this out by looking at the nutritional information on food packaging. Whole foods like vegetables, fruit, pulses and wholegrains are often naturally high in fibre.
Examples of high fibre foods include:

- Fruits, including dried fruit, avocados, and vegetables – unpeeled (but washed or cooked) where appropriate
- Beans e.g. butterbeans, baked, cannellini and kidney beans
- Pulses e.g. lentils and peas
- Wholegrain/wholemeal foods, such as wholegrain breakfast cereals, wholegrain crackers/crispbread, wholemeal bread/rice/pasta
- Oats and oatcakes
- Nuts
- Seeds e.g. brown or golden linseeds can help to soften stools and make them easier to pass. Try adding one tablespoon per day (either whole or ground) to breakfast cereal, porridge, *yoghurt*, soup, sauces or on salad. This can be increased gradually to two or three tablespoons a day as needed. Ensure that you drink a small glass (150ml) of fluid with each tablespoon taken.

Specialist advice should be sought from your healthcare team if you’re receiving treatment for a cancer that involves the bowel, and you’re experiencing difficulties with food.
Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea is a frequently experienced side-effect of cancer treatments. Chemotherapy and pelvic radiotherapy can affect the lining of the digestive system, leading to loose bowel motions. This is usually temporary.

Infections and certain medications such as antibiotics can also give you diarrhoea. It’s important to discover the cause of it to ensure that it’s correctly treated or managed. Probiotics and/or anti-diarrhoeal medications should be discussed with your nurse/doctor.

If you have diarrhoea, it’s important that you drink additional fluid to replace the liquid you’ve lost and prevent dehydration. Opting for decaffeinated drinks may also help to avoid further stimulation of the bowel. Alcohol should also be avoided for this reason. It’s also sensible to reduce or avoid fatty, fried, spicy foods as these may make your diarrhoea worse.
For some people, short term changes to the amount or type of fibre within their diet can also help (See page 42 for tips to reduce your soluble fibre intake), but if this doesn’t improve things, ask for further information and advice from your healthcare team.

If you’re experiencing severe diarrhoea or if diarrhoea persists more than a few weeks after your treatment finishes, it’s important to seek advice from your healthcare team.
Tenesmus refers to cramping rectal pain, which results in the feeling that you need to have a bowel movement, even if you have recently had one.

It’s frequently experienced by people that have received brachytherapy (internal radiotherapy), and also radiotherapy to the bowel/pelvic area.

Medical treatments can help to manage tenesmus, and some people may also find relief from adapting their diet to reduce the amount of roughage (insoluble fibre) that they eat.

Tips to reduce your insoluble fibre intake:
- Avoid seeds/nuts, instead choose smooth nut butters
- Avoid fruit with pips e.g. berries
- Avoid citrus fruits
- Avoid leaves e.g. lettuce, spinach and cabbages
- Avoid beans, pulses, peas, sweetcorn, onions and mushrooms.
Remove skin/peel from potatoes, vegetables and fruits
Choose white starchy carbohydrates, rather than wholemeal/granary/seeded varieties:
- White bread products/white sourdough
- White pasta/rice/couscous
Use smooth tomato sauces/puree or passata, rather than fresh or chopped/plum tinned tomatoes.

Ideally try to re-introduce fibre containing foods gradually as soon as your symptoms allow. Please discuss this with your healthcare team if you require further support.
Conclusion

Even if eating to support your health becomes difficult because of cancer or cancer treatments, there are usually a few small simple steps that you and your healthcare team can take to make things a little easier.

At times like these it’s very important to choose foods that you enjoy as much as possible, but, with the information in this booklet and a little experimentation and creativity, we hope you can still find ways of making sure you get the nutrients you need to give your body the best chance of recovering quickly and well after your treatment has finished.

Once you have finished your treatment, any treatment-related disturbance of your eating or digestion should gradually improve over a number of weeks. Occasionally fatigue can last longer than this. If you’re experiencing severe or persistent symptoms, or notice unexpected changes in your weight, it’s important that you contact a healthcare professional (your GP or a member of your cancer team) as you may need further support with this, or need to be treated with medication.
As your symptoms settle down after treatment, you should find that you can gradually increase the variety of healthy foods you’re able to eat and enjoy. Alongside being physically active and learning to manage stress levels, eating healthily can play a very important role in supporting your recovery and rebuilding your resilience, so that you’ve the best chances of living well after treatment finishes.
Useful resources

Recipe books and booklets

Penny Brohn UK: Nourish Cookbook, and 7–day recipe plan
The Inspirational Soup Book (also available here)
www.shopatpennybrohn.com

Also available from: Penny Brohn UK, Chapel Pill Lane, BS20 0HH

Macmillan: Recipes for People Affected by Cancer
www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/maintaining-a-healthy-lifestyle/recipes

The Royal Marsden: Cancer Cookbook
Includes practical information and recipes for during and after treatment. Available from all major bookstores, and online.

World Cancer Research Fund: Eat Well During Cancer
shop.wcrf-uk.org/products/eat-well-during-cancer
Organisations and websites

Penny Brohn UK
Bristol based national charity providing holistic support for people with cancer including nutritional and integrative medical advice, lifestyle and emotional support and complementary therapies.
www.pennybrohn.org.uk
0303 3000 118

Macmillan Cancer Support
We’re here to help everyone with cancer live life as fully as they can, providing physical, financial and emotional support. So whatever cancer throws your way, we’re right there with you.
www.macmillan.org.uk
Call free on 0808 808 00 00

World Cancer Research Fund
Leading research body looking at cancer prevention and survival through diet, weight and physical activity.
www.wcrf-uk.org
Cancer Research UK
Leading UK charity with a research focus, providing practical evidence based information on all cancers.
www.cancerresearchuk.org

NHS Choices
The UK’s biggest health website and the official website of the National Health Service in England.
www.nhs.uk

Specific cancer organisations recommended by your healthcare team
Bowel Cancer UK/Beating Bowel Cancer, Prostate Cancer UK, or Pancreatic Cancer Action, may have advice on eating well for your type of cancer and cancer treatment.
Acknowledgements

This booklet was written and edited by specialist registered dietitians in Bristol and Somerset working in NHS Trusts and Macmillan Cancer Support, alongside doctors and nutritional therapists from Penny Brohn UK.

Date: April 2019
Review date: April 2022