

Loss of Appetite During Cancer Treatment



Loss of appetite is a loss of the desire to eat. Not eating can lead to weight loss, which can cause weakness and severe tiredness (fatigue). This affects your ability to do daily activities. Good nutrition also helps your body prevent and fight infection.

What causes loss of appetite?

Loss of appetite may be due to the cancer, or from the cancer treatment. You may have loss of appetite if you have any of these:

- Tiredness
- Pain
- Taste changes, such as with sugar, salt, or meat
- Side effects from medicines
- Changes in your mood or feeling depressed

Managing loss of appetite

You need to eat enough to maintain weight, do daily activities, and prevent illness.

To help you eat enough:

- Eat small meals 5 to 6 times a day instead of 3 large meals.
- Eat nutritious foods that are high in protein and calories. Try snacks such as hard-boiled eggs, peanut butter, or trail mix.
- Help family members plan meals you would like to eat.
- Let others cook for you. Talk with them first about specific needs and requests.
- Eat in pleasant surroundings with friends or family.
- Try using plastic utensils and cook in a glass pot if foods have a metal taste.
- If strong smells bother you, stay away from the area where food is being prepared. Eat cold foods instead of hot foods. Cold foods don't smell as much.
- Do light exercise before meals.
- Try new recipes.
- Don't smoke. It can affect your sense of smell and change your sense of taste.

To prevent feeling full too fast:

- Don't eat high-fat foods.
- Don't drink much at meal time because you may feel full too quickly. Drink liquids at least 30 minutes before meals and throughout the day between meals so that you do not become dehydrated.

- Chew food slowly.
- Don't eat foods or have drinks that cause gas. These include cabbage or broccoli and fizzy drinks, such as beer or soda.

Food safety during cancer treatment

To prevent foodborne illness during cancer treatment:

- Wash your hands well with soap and water before making or serving foods.
- Clean all utensils and cooking or storage containers fully.
- Thaw frozen foods in refrigerator or microwave, not at room temperature.
- Cook all raw protein foods to safe temperatures. This includes eggs, meats, poultry, and fish.
- Serve hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Don't let foods get to room temperature.
- Refrigerate foods quickly.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Use only pasteurized dairy products. Don't eat raw cheese or drink raw milk.
- Don't use foods beyond expiration dates.

Working with your healthcare team

Tell your healthcare team if you have side effects from cancer treatment that affect your ability to eat. These can include dry mouth, mouth sores, nausea, vomiting, or constipation. Your healthcare provider may change your medicine. Or they may prescribe medicine to help increase your appetite.

Your healthcare provider may also ask you to:

- Keep a daily food diary.
- Weigh yourself regularly.
- Write down changes in mood, appetite, and other feelings you have.

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of the below:

- Trouble drinking enough fluids
- Trouble eating any food
- Weight loss of 3 or more pounds in a week
- Uncontrolled pain
- Dizzy feeling when you stand up
- Any other problems or questions

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