

# Cancer and Cancer Treatment Related Lack of Appetite and Early Satiety

Other terms: not hungry, loss of appetite, or anorexia

Poor appetite: the feeling of not being hungry, no desire to eat and/or no taste for any food.

Early satiety: the feeling of being full after eating only a small amount of food.

Loss of appetite is not always related to cancer treatment or an underlying condition. It may be caused by:

- Aging (or Ageing)
- Emotional or physical stress
- Reaction to certain medicines
- Pregnancy (first trimester)

Loss of appetite related to cancer and/or cancer treatment may be caused by:

- Depression
- Feeling the need to vomit (nausea)
- Taste changes
- Tumor growth
- Difficulty swallowing
- Pain

Practical tips to prevent and manage loss of appetite:

Food Preparation

- Try to eat small meals or snacks, every two to three hours, instead of three large meals a day (become a grazer).
- Foods that are high in protein or calories are good snacks to have handy. Examples include; milk shakes, cheese, fruits, peanut butter, nuts, crackers and juices.
- Eat foods that are rich in calories and nutrients. Avoid low-calorie foods that fill you up, such as lettuce, broth and diet soda.
- When choosing beverages, select nutrient-dense fluids such as milk, milk shakes, juice and punch-type drinks.
- Avoid heavy meals, greasy or fried foods, and foods that cause gas. Examples of gas-producing foods include: beans, cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, and carbonated drinks.
- Prepare food that is colorful and appealing to the eye.

### Surroundings and Their Effect on Lack of Appetite

- Try to eat with friends or family. Often times, people will eat more when they are socializing.
- Try changing the time, place, and surroundings of meals. Watch your favorite TV program while you eat.
- Use a plate that is larger than needed and put small portions on the plate. That way the amount of food that you need to eat does not look so overwhelming.
- Avoid smells that are obnoxious or bothersome to you while you are eating.

### Taste Changes from Cancer or Chemo Treatments:

- If you have a lack of appetite because you have lost your sense of taste from chemo treatment, you may want to try adding different seasonings to your foods.
- If you have a bad taste in your mouth, try sucking on hard candies/mints or chewing gum. Also, keep your mouth clean by brushing at least two times per day and rinsing your mouth out with water between meals/snacks.

### Dry Mouth

- If you aren't eating much because your mouth is dry, try increasing your non-alcoholic fluid intake to at least two liters per day; just make sure it is okay with your doctor to drink this much fluid. Also limit the amount of fluid you drink with meals. Liquids make you feel full. Save the liquids for between meals.

- Avoid toothpaste and mouthwashes that contain alcohol as this can cause further drying of your mouth. To stimulate saliva, or to make your mouth moist, try sucking on ice cubes, candies, or gum.

### Mouth Sores

If you are not eating because you have sores in your mouth, use a soft bristle toothbrush to brush your teeth. You can also rinse your mouth with a mixture of 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of baking soda or 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of salt in 8 ounces of water about four or five times a day. Check with your doctor if it is okay to use acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen for the discomfort.

### Exercise

After getting approval from your doctor, try to do some daily, mild exercise. Sometimes some daily activity, like twenty minutes of walking or yoga, or playing with a pet, will help stimulate your appetite, relieve stress, improve your mood, and help you sleep better at night.

### Medications for Treatment of Lack of Appetite:

Note: These drugs are not usually prescribed for temporary or short-term appetite problems.

- Megestrol acetate (Megace®) comes in a pill and liquid form.
- Metoclopramide (Reglan®) comes in tablets (pill) and in liquid form.
- Dronabinol (Marinol®) comes in a capsule (pill) form.
- Mirtazapine (Remeron®) comes in oral tablets and an orally disintegrating tablet
- Steroids like prednisone or dexamethasone (Decadron®) can increase your appetite and sense of well-being. These also come in tablets and liquid form.
- Alcohol, one glass of wine or beer, can help stimulate your appetite and add some calories to your meal.

If you are experiencing early satiety or lack of appetite related to cancer or cancer treatments, the following guidelines suggest when to call your doctor or health care provider:

- Trouble swallowing
- Losing weight
- Abdominal pain
- Nausea (interferes with ability to eat and unrelieved with prescribed medications).
- Vomiting (more than 4-5 times in a 24-hour period).
- Mouth sores

- If you continue to have lack of appetite despite trying some of the above recommendations.
- Any other bothersome symptoms and concerns.

Note: We strongly encourage you to talk with your health care professional about your specific medical condition and treatments. The information contained in this website is meant to be helpful and educational, but is not a substitute for medical advice.