

# Dietary advice during chemotherapy

**This leaflet aims to answer some of the questions you may have about your diet whilst receiving chemotherapy. If you have any questions or concerns, please ask your oncology dietitian or nurse.**

**If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the oncology dietitians whose details are given at the end of this leaflet.**

## Do you need a special diet during chemotherapy?

You do not need a special diet whilst on chemotherapy. It is more important to have a nutritious and well balanced diet to help you cope with the side effects of treatment better, prevent weight loss, prevent nutritional deficiencies, reduce the risk of infections and help in recovery from treatment.

There are many advertised dietary supplements, herbal preparations and anti-cancer diets that claim to cure cancer or help slow its growth. However, there is no reliable scientific evidence to support this. If you decide to take dietary supplements of any kind, please discuss this with your oncology dietitian or doctor. Your oncology dietitian can ensure you receive the correct information and make an informed decision.

## Eating well with chemotherapy

Eating well means eating a varied and balanced diet that will provide your body with all the nutrients it needs to function well. These nutrients include protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins, and minerals.

The following information will give you ideas on how to maintain a balanced diet that provides adequate calories and the nutrients your body needs.

### Try to...

- Eat at least three meals every day and include a variety of foods that you enjoy.
- Have starchy carbohydrate foods such as bread, potatoes, rice, pasta, yam, plantain, chapattis and cereals at each meal. These are energy-rich foods.
- Include meat, poultry, fish, eggs, cheese, and yoghurt, beans, Quorn, tofu or lentils at least twice per day. These are protein-rich foods.
- Include fruits and vegetables in your meals every day. These provide vitamins and minerals.
- Drink at least six to eight cups of fluids each day. In addition to water, try tea, coffee, fruit juice, fruit squash, soups, milky drinks and smoothies.

### **Making meals easy**

Nutritious meals do not have to be hot meals and can be quick to prepare. Sandwiches, flans and quiches, tinned fish and meats can all go towards making a nutritious meal. If you are finding cooking difficult or tiring, try using convenience foods which can be as nutritious as home cooked meals. Supermarkets and some large stores have a wide range of frozen, chilled, packet and tinned foods and meals.

## **Weight changes with chemotherapy**

Weight changes may occur directly or indirectly as a result of chemotherapy. A slight change in your weight during chemotherapy is not a concern.

### **Weight loss**

Significant weight loss may affect your ability to tolerate chemotherapy. Rapid and significant weight loss can lead to loss of muscle resulting in decreased strength, weakness, fatigue and a reduced ability to perform day to day activities.

Chemotherapy-related weight loss may occur as a result of side effects such as:

- loss of appetite
- taste and smell changes
- dry and/or sore mouth
- nausea and vomiting
- bowel changes such as constipation or diarrhoea
- fatigue.

Your oncology doctor will prescribe medication to help with some of these side effects such as anti-sickness drugs, pain relief drugs, laxatives, anti-diarrhoeal drugs and mouth washes.

If you have lost your appetite or food intake is affected by any of the above, these are some simple steps that may help.

### **Try to...**

- Eat little and often.
- Enrich your foods with fats and sugars such as butter, cheese, cream, honey and syrup. This will provide you with more energy.
- Choose high energy snacks such as cheese and biscuits, cakes and full fat yoghurts.
- If you are having difficulty with eating solid foods, have more nutritious fluids such as milk shakes.

An oncology dietitian will be able to provide you with further practical advice on how to better manage some of these chemotherapy side effects and how to enrich your meals to help maintain or regain weight. Additional information leaflets can be provided by the oncology dietitians on how to manage the side effects of treatment.

### **Weight gain**

Unwanted excess weight gain may occur during chemotherapy for some people. This may be due to decreased physical activity and increased eating as a result of boredom, stress or steroid-related increased appetite. In the short term, a slight increase in weight is not a concern, although in the longer term can affect your health. Your oncology dietitian will be able to provide dietary advice on how to better manage this.

## Food safety and chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can interfere with the body's natural defence against infections including breakdown of skin and reducing the number of white blood cells (neutrophils) in your blood. Ensuring food safety whilst on chemotherapy is important to reduce the risk of food poisoning.

The best way to ensure food safety includes cooking food properly to reduce numbers of germs to a safe level; storing food at correct temperatures to limit growth of germs, avoiding contamination of food after cooking from other foods, kitchen utensils and people. Here are some practical ways in which you can ensure food safety and limit risk.

### Shopping

- Check expiry and 'use by date' on food labels.
- Avoid mouldy, bruised or damaged fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid foods with damaged or broken packaging.
- Make sure you get chilled and frozen foods home as soon as possible.

### Storage

- Keep your fridge between 4°C and 7°C. Keep your freezer below -18°C.
- Chill foods properly especially foods with a 'use by' date, cooked dishes and ready-to-eat foods such as prepared salads, cut fruits and desserts.
- Cool cooked food within two hours and cover before storing in the fridge or freezer.
- Store raw and cooked foods in separate areas or shelves – cooked and ready-to-eat foods at the top of the fridge and raw meats at the bottom of the fridge in a covered container.
- Throw mouldy food away and any food past its 'use by date'.
- Don't refreeze raw food once defrosted unless you have cooked it first.
- Leftover food should not be kept in the refrigerator for more than two to three days.

### Food preparation

- Wash hands thoroughly before preparing food and after touching raw foods such as meat/poultry, fish, eggs and unwashed fruit and vegetables.
- Ensure that all preparation surfaces are clean before you start preparing food.
- Cooked food should not come into contact with raw meat, unwashed vegetables or salads, or with utensils, cloths or surfaces contaminated by contact with raw food.
- Use separate chopping boards for raw food and ready-to-eat food.
- Wash salads, fruit and vegetables thoroughly before eating.

### Cooking

- Thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator and cook immediately once thawed.
- Ensure food is cooked properly, thoroughly and piping hot throughout.
- When cooking with a microwave oven, turn and stir foods halfway through cooking time to prevent uneven heating.
- Serve hot food as soon as possible after cooking.
- Do not reheat cooked food more than once and make sure it is piping hot throughout.

### Eating out

- Always ask for your food to be freshly prepared.
- Ensure hot foods are served piping hot and cooked all the way through.
- Avoid buying food from salad bars, buffets, street vendors and ice cream vans.

## **Foods requiring additional care to avoid food poisoning**

Some foods have a higher risk of carrying germs and it is important to be careful in their preparation, cooking and storage to limit risk of food poisoning.

### **Eggs**

- Store eggs in the fridge.
- Cook well until solid before eating.
- Avoid food products containing raw eggs such as home-made caesar salad dressing and hollandaise sauce.

### **Poultry, red meat and products**

- Cook thoroughly and do not serve pink or rare.

### **Rice**

- Serve as soon as rice is cooked.
- If storing cooked rice, cool quickly within one hour of cooking and store in the fridge.
- Store cooked rice in the fridge for no more than one day.
- When reheating cooked rice, ensure it is steaming hot all the way through.

### **Milk, cheese and yoghurts**

- Pasteurised milk and cheese products are safe to eat but avoid unpasteurised products.
- Avoid mould-ripened and blue veined cheeses such as brie, camembert, gorgonzola and roquefort.
- Cheeses safe to eat include the following –
  - Hard cheeses such as cheddar, cheshire, derby, double gloucester, edam, emmental, gouda, gruyere, parmesan and red leicester.
  - Soft cheeses such as cottage cheese, mozzarella, feta, cream cheese, paneer, ricotta, halloumi, goats' cheese, Quark and processed cheeses including cheese segments.
- Avoid supplements, food and drinks containing probiotics such as bio-yoghurts, Actimel, Yakult and supermarket own brands. These products contain live bacteria and although are generally considered safe, need to be used with caution during chemotherapy when your immune function may be weakened.

### **Fish, oysters, and other seafood**

- Do not eat raw seafood such as oysters or shellfish.
- Sushi made from frozen raw fish and cooked shellfish are safer to eat as freezing and cooking will reduce the risk of food poisoning.
- Ensure smoked salmon is stored in the fridge and eaten before its 'use by' date.

## Oncology dietitians

The oncology dietitians can provide information, dietary advice and support throughout your treatment especially if you:

- are losing weight (more than 2kg since last appointment)
- are underweight
- are struggling with eating and drinking due to;
  - poor appetite
  - taste changes
  - swallowing difficulties
  - feeling full
  - dry mouth
  - sore mouth
  - changes in bowel habit.
- have questions about alternative diets

### Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the oncology dietitians at the nutrition and dietetics department on 020 7188 4128 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm). If we are unable to take your call, please leave us a message and we will call you back.

Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals offer a range of cancer-related information leaflets for patients and carers, available at [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/cancer-leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/cancer-leaflets). For information leaflets on other conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)



**Dimbleby Cancer Care** provides cancer support services for Guy's and St Thomas'. We have a drop-in information area staffed by specialist nurses and offer complementary therapies, psychological support and benefits advice for patients and carers.

Dimbleby Cancer Care is located in the Welcome Village of the Cancer Centre at Guy's. **t:** 020 7188 5918 **e:** [DimblebyCancerCare@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:DimblebyCancerCare@gstt.nhs.uk)

### **Pharmacy Medicines Helpline**

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the clinical nurse specialist or other member of staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### **Your comments and concerns**

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

### **Language and Accessible Support Services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

**t:** 020 7188 8815 **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

### **NHS 111**

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 111

### **NHS Choices**

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### **Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust**

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

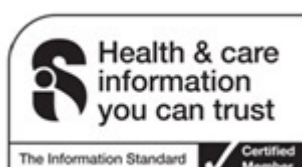
**t:** 0800 731 0319 **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk) **w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership)

**Leaflet number: 4008/VER2**

Date published: September 2016

Review date: January 2018

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