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# Nutritional tips for caregivers: taking care of yourself before you take care of others

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While people with cancer face many nutritional challenges, it’s common for caregivers to have their own issues and concerns. One of the biggest challenges for a caregiver is when a loved one has changes in their appetite or a decreased desire to eat. You’re not alone if you have experienced challenges in caring for a loved one and helping them manage their nutrition.

**Help is available**

Being a caregiver to a loved one with cancer can be an added responsibility you weren't prepared for. Perhaps the person with cancer was always the one who did the cooking and grocery shopping in your household, and you don't know where to begin. Or maybe you're a caregiver who already has multiple family responsibilities, and you don't know how you'll manage this additional one. It can be quite overwhelming.

One of the most important first steps is to remember that you can reach out for support. Take it one day at a time, and enlist the help of friends and family to help you make a plan and set your priorities.

**Here are some examples:**

- Can a friend help you with grocery shopping?
- Have friends and family offered to bring over a warm meal?
- Can you order meals from a healthy-meal delivery service?

**Managing common eating struggles**

In addition to feeling overwhelmed as a caregiver, you may also be dealing with a loved one with cancer who is having trouble eating or is losing weight. It can be difficult to watch mealtime become a constant challenge when it once may have been cherished family time.

**Ways to help your loved one eat without making the situation more stressful**

- Make mealtime relaxing by lighting a pleasantly scented candle or playing calming music
- Use smaller, appetizer-sized plates to make portions less intimidating when your loved one's appetite is poor
- Focus on the positive—encourage your loved one when they're trying to eat more
- If your loved one is experiencing digestive issues, it may be difficult for them to eat. Allow them to take some time to get relief, and suggest that they try to eat again a little while later

**Nutritional strategies to help your loved one**

There are many strategies that can help people with cancer manage symptoms that affect their nutrition. It’s a good idea to enlist the help of a registered dietitian if there is one available at your loved one’s medical center. If there isn’t, you can ask for a referral for one in the community or from the local hospital. He or she can help create a nutrition plan for your loved one.

**Strategies that you can try at home:**

- Encourage your loved one to eat small, frequent meals throughout the day instead of big meals less often. Eating more often may help your loved one eat better when they are less hungry
- Offer nutrient-dense snacks like fruit with yogurt, cottage cheese, cheese and crackers, nuts, trail mix and granola bars. If your loved one has special dietary needs, ask his or her healthcare team to help identify foods he or she can tolerate
- Try nutritional shakes and smoothies made with yogurt, fruit, nut butter and whatever kind of milk your loved one prefers
- Consider adding a protein powder or commercially available, ready-to-drink nutritional shakes to your loved one’s diet for added calories and protein. Be sure to speak with his or her healthcare team before trying any new nutritional product
- Use a food journal to record your loved one’s eating habits over time. Sharing this information with the healthcare team and registered dietitian can help the team address nutritional concerns as they come up

**Be sure to take care of yourself**

Taking care of someone with cancer can take a toll on the caregiver. You need to stay strong and healthy to have the energy to care for your loved one. Here are some important things to remember:

**1. Eat regular, balanced meals**

Avoid skipping meals. Eating healthy meals at regular intervals will give you the nutrition you need to stay healthy.

**2. Avoid fast foods**

While it may be tempting to eat on the run when you are busy, try to avoid unhealthy high-fat and high-calorie foods. Plan ahead and bring along a healthy snack like trail mix, a granola bar or a sandwich like a wrap with chicken and vegetables.

**3. Cook in bulk and freeze for later**

Having freezer meals, such as soups, stews and casseroles on hand can help on days when you are busy with appointments or other responsibilities.

**4. Get enough rest and exercise**

Get a good night's sleep. If your sleep is interrupted during the night, try to find time to take a brief nap during the day. Even a brisk walk or jog, stretching or yoga can help to relieve stress and clear your mind. Taking a break can help you be a better caregiver.

| **MY CAREGIVING CHECKLIST** |
| --- |
| ¨ Enlist the help of family and friends with meal preparation, meal delivery and grocery shopping. |
| ¨ Make mealtime more relaxing and positive. Allow your loved one to eat when they feel best, providing encouragement and support when needed. |
| ¨ Encourage good nutrition with small frequent meals, nutrient-dense snacks, nutritional shakes and smoothies. Talk to a registered dietitian about your loved one's nutritional needs. |
| ¨ Take good care of yourself by getting enough sleep and exercise so you have enough energy to care for your loved one. |
| ¨ As a caregiver, aim to eat regular, well-balanced meals and limit unhealthy fast foods. Plan ahead to have healthy foods on-the-go and stocked in the freezer. |

*This article has general information and is not meant to replace nutritional or health guidance that is specific to any individual. Speak to your healthcare provider before making any changes to your diet or lifestyle. Consult with a registered dietitian if you are on a restricted or modified diet.*