Article Series Nutrition

Eating well when you’ve lost your appetite

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Why does appetite sometimes change with cancer? There are a few different reasons.

Cancer treatments, including chemotherapy and radiotherapy, may have side effects that affect appetite. For example, nausea, dry mouth, constipation and diarrhea, can make eating less appealing and more difficult. Other side effects of treatment, such as changes in smell and taste, might make you less interested in eating overall, or no longer interested in specific foods you once enjoyed.

Stress, anxiety, depression and other emotional challenges associated with living with cancer can also contribute to a loss of appetite.

If your appetite changes, it’s important to keep getting the nutrition you need, even if your eating habits look different. Creating a meal plan that works for you may help you avoid or minimize potential negative effects of losing your appetite, such as weight loss, malnutrition, weakness and fatigue.

And for many people who are managing appetite changes and weight loss during cancer, it’s especially important to focus on getting enough calories and protein. This may mean exploring new foods — and ways of preparing foods.

Here are some **Microsteps** to consider if you’re managing appetite loss or changes. As always, consult with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

Eating small meals throughout the day.

Instead of sitting down to three full meals, try eating smaller portions frequently throughout the day, giving yourself a chance to eat about every two to three hours.

Opting for cold or room-temperature foods.

If the taste or aroma of some foods now feels overpowering, try cool, cold and frozen foods, which may have a milder flavor and be less likely to have a strong smell. Try a cold hard-boiled egg instead of scrambled, plain rice cakes instead of warm toast, and refreshing treats like cubed and chilled melon, frozen grapes or frozen banana slices.

Avoiding beverages 30 minutes before a meal.

Drinking liquids before or during a meal can fill you up, making it harder for you to eat as much as you need to. Try setting a cut-off time to limit fluids.

Moving before mealtime.

A bit of physical activity may help stimulate your appetite. You may consider taking a short walk or doing light housework, like tidying a room or wiping kitchen counters.

Prepping healthy, pre-portioned snacks in advance.

Consider putting nuts, dried fruit, or crackers with cheese or peanut butter into bags or small containers, or buy other portable snacks you can eat at home or while you’re out.

Experimenting with new recipes and cooking techniques.

You may find that certain foods or preparation methods you didn’t like before are now more appealing. For example, you might enjoy creamy soups or fruit smoothies more than you did before, or prefer steamed veggies for their softer texture.

Adding a protein shake to your daily routine.

Shakes and smoothies can help increase your daily calories and protein if you don’t feel much like eating. Here’s one recipe to try: Blend together 1 cup of your preferred milk, ¼ cup Greek yogurt, 2 tablespoons of hemp seeds, 1 tablespoon of almond butter, 1/2 a ripe banana, and a handful of soft oats for a creamy, protein-rich shake that’s gentle on a dry mouth. For an extra protein boost, add a scoop of your favorite protein powder.

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