Article Series Nutrition

7 simple food swaps to support your energy

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Fatigue is common for people living with cancer. If you’re feeling physically tired and mentally drained, some simple food swaps to increase your protein and other nutrients may help keep your energy level up.

Getting enough protein, either animal- or plant-based, can help you maintain muscle. This is important because muscle mass can decrease if you lose weight during cancer treatment. Protein also helps your body create white blood cells, which fight infections.

Your care team can help you determine your protein needs, as individual needs can vary. A general guideline for those living with cancer is to have about 1.5 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight each day. This extra protein could be found in a cup of edamame (18 grams) or half of a chicken breast (28 grams).

You'll also want to make sure you're eating healthy fats, as well as a variety of vitamins and minerals, like antioxidants in colorful vegetables, and vitamins like B vitamins, which help the body turn protein, fat, and carbs into energy.

Here are some small food swaps and **Microsteps** you can try to add more protein and nutrients to your diet. As always, consult with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

Switching to legume pasta instead of regular pasta in one meal this week.

Legume-based pastas, including those made with beans, lentils, or chickpeas, often contain more protein and fiber, which releases energy slowly, than standard semolina or wheat pastas. Top them with any favorite sauces you use on regular pasta.

Adding frozen Greek yogurt cubes to a smoothie instead of ice cubes.

This can help keep your smoothie cold while adding more protein. Drinking smoothies can be especially helpful if you're having trouble swallowing or don't want a big meal. Other ways to add protein to a smoothie include blending in protein powder, hemp seeds, or a few spoonfuls of peanut or almond butter.

Replacing one of your go-to lunches with one that's high in B vitamins, like leafy greens, nuts, or fish.

B vitamins are important for energy production, as they help your body use protein, carbohydrates, and fats for fuel. Some B vitamin-rich foods you can try are leafy green vegetables, avocados, nuts and seeds, fish and shellfish, edamame, chickpeas, lentils, and eggs. For example, you could swap a chicken salad sandwich with a salmon salad sandwich, or have a burrito bowl with lentils instead of rice.

Using toppings that can add healthy fats to your meals.

Fats are calorie-dense, which means they can be helpful if you need to maintain or put on weight. Some simple ways to add fats are drizzling olive oil on avocado toast instead of salt, topping salads with chopped hard-boiled eggs instead of croutons, or adding a handful of nuts to full-fat yogurt instead of granola.

Finding a go-to whole food to replace a packaged snack.

Packaged, ultraprocessed foods often contain high levels of sugar, sodium, and unhealthy fats. Switching to a go-to whole food like a hard-boiled egg, string cheese, or piece of fruit with nut butter instead can help you get more nutrients, like protein and fiber, without sacrificing convenience.

Using hummus instead of mayonnaise on a sandwich or wrap.

Hummus is rich in protein, fiber, and B vitamins which can all help support your energy levels.

Eating fatty fish instead of meat in one meal each week.

Fatty fish, such as salmon and mackerel, are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which may lower inflammation and reduce fatigue.

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