

Diet and Cancer

After your diagnosis, you may have lots of questions around diet and cancer. On the other hand, you may have had no time to think about how and what you are eating. This leaflet aims to provide an overview of dietary advice tailored for people with cancer. It is important to eat well and keep active after a cancer diagnosis. Eating a healthy and balanced diet means eating a wide variety of foods in the right proportions. The food groups below will help you to include the foods that your body needs.

Starchy Carbohydrates:

Examples include cereals, bread, chapattis, rice, potatoes and yam. Over a third of our diet should be made up from starchy carbohydrates. They can provide your body with energy, fibre and some vitamins and minerals.

Dairy or Alternatives:

Examples include milk, cheese, cream, butter and alternatives made from soya, oats and other plant based sources.

Dairy and fortified alternatives provide protein, calcium and some vitamins. They should make up a small part of a regular diet.

Meat, Fish, Eggs, Beans or Meat Alternatives:

Examples include chicken, beef, pork, eggs, chickpeas, baked beans, or alternatives, such as Quorn or Tofu. These foods can provide protein, vitamins and minerals. Aim to eat less than 2 portions of red and processed meat a week. Try to include 2 portions of fish, preferably oily, a week.

Fruits and Vegetables:

Examples include apples, peppers, tinned tomatoes, frozen peas, carrots and bananas.

Over a third of our diet should be made up from fruits and vegetables. They are a source of vitamins, minerals and fibre. Aim for at least 5 portions a day.

Fluids:

Fluid is important in many bodily functions. All fluid counts, but alcohol and coffee can be dehydrating. Aim to drink 6-8 glasses of fluid a day, not going long periods without topping up.

Foods High in Sugar and Salt, or Ultra-Processed Foods:

Examples include takeaway foods, pre-made biscuits, cakes, crisps, condiments and soft drinks.

Reduce your intake of these foods, as they are energy dense but provide very little nutritional worth.

Questions people sometimes have:

Fibre

Fibre helps your gut to work normally. It increases good bacteria which supports your immunity against inflammatory disorders and allergies. It also helps to keep bowel movements healthy and regular. Most people should aim to increase their fibre intake - good sources of fibre include fruits, vegetables, wholegrain bread, wholegrain pasta, cereals and brown rice.

If your cancer team or doctor advises to limit your fibre intake, please adhere to this guidance. If you are unsure please contact your cancer team and they can clarify.

Alcohol:

Alcohol is linked to some cancers and diseases. The national guidance states men and women should have no more than 14 units a week. 1 unit is half a pint of beer, 1 small glass of wine or 1 measure of spirit. Intake should be spread out over a few days, and we should aim to have alcohol free days every week.

Movement and Exercise

Eating Before Exercise:

Eating a low-fat, high carbohydrate meal 90 minutes to two hours before exercising will help your energy levels before the activity. Examples can include beans on toast, jacket potato or a bowl of pasta.

Eating After Exercise:

Eating a higher protein snack after an exercise will help to rebuild and repair muscles and replenish your energy stores. Examples can include egg on toast, hummus and pitta, or a yoghurt pot.

For More Information

If you wish to speak to someone in person about any dietary concerns, please contact your cancer team or the cancer information services at the Sir Robert Ogden Macmillan Centre. They can make the right referrals to support you in the best way they can. You may be referred to a Dietitian if you are underweight, find it difficult to maintain a healthy weight or have problems with symptoms and side effects when you eat or drink.