

Breast cancer Diet

Almost all patients wonder if there is a special diet for those undergoing treatment or after completing treatment for breast cancer. This article highlights aspects of healthy eating and what one can do if appetite or diet changes due to any side effects of treatment.

There are many conflicting ideas and theories about diet and nutrition and this can be confusing, particularly when trying to understand all sorts of other information about breast cancer and its treatment.

Most experts agree that a healthy diet should be balanced and varied providing all the right nutrients needed for good health.

Diet during treatment



Recovery from surgery

After surgery, it is quite normal to will miss a meal or two, which should not be a problem. Most people are able to start eating again the same day as surgery and appetite should build up over the following few days. Eating well will help the body recover and heal.

Chemotherapy

Appetite

Chemotherapy can affect appetite. It is quite normal not to feel like eating normal diet. It helps to eat little and often rather than having a larger meal. Appetite should improve within a few days of treatment.

Nausea

Nausea and vomiting can be a problem for some people during and after chemotherapy. However, there are several types of anti-sickness (anti-emetic) drugs that can be prescribed which are very effective.

Even if a meal is missed, it may not matter much. It is important however to take frequent sips of water/coconut water/fresh juices rather than trying to drink a lot in one go. Eating little and often may help.

Sore mouth

Chemotherapy can make the mouth sore or dry, which can make it uncomfortable to eat. It is important to keep the mouth clean and fresh by cleaning teeth with a soft toothbrush after eating. Soft, moist foods such as soups and desserts can be easier to eat. Drinking with a straw can help by avoiding sore areas in the mouth. It may be a good idea not to eat foods that can irritate or hurt your mouth, such as crunchy, salty, spicy, acidic or hot foods, until the problem settles.

Taste changes

During chemotherapy, taste can change; some food may seem bland or different and certain foods do not taste so good anymore. Certain chemotherapy drugs can cause a metallic taste in the mouth. Adding herbs or spices to the meals or trying stronger flavoured foods can help disguise any taste changes. Drinking plenty of water also helps.

Constipation

If eating and drinking is reduced, constipation can be a problem. This can also be due to medication such as painkillers and some anti-sickness drugs. Drinking plenty is important. Eating foods that contain fibre such as wholemeal bread, high-fibre breakfast cereal, beans and lentils, and fresh and dried fruit can help.

Diarrhoea

Occasionally certain chemotherapy drugs can cause diarrhoea. If this happens, it can help to reduce the amount of foods containing fibre and reduce fruit and vegetable intake. Drinking plenty is also important. The Specialist may also prescribe medication to stop the diarrhoea.

Radiotherapy

Having radiotherapy should not cause any problems to diet. One should still try to eat a well-balanced diet with a wide variety of foods and to drink plenty.

Shopping and cooking

During treatment and recovery, carrying out normal activities of shopping and cooking may seem exhausting. It is important to get someone over for help.

Weight gain

Some people find they put on weight during and after treatment, which can be distressing. This may be due to:

- taking less exercise than normal and generally being less active
- eating more when anxious
- the side effects of some drugs
- the body retaining fluid
- the menopause (if treatment has caused your periods to stop) which makes people more likely to put on weight, particularly around the waist.

It is not usually a good idea to follow strict diets and lose too much weight during treatment. However, it is beneficial to try to eat healthily and take regular exercise to try to maintain a healthy weight and not put weight on. It is not healthy to be either underweight or overweight.

How to lose weight

If one wants to lose weight after treatment, aim for a realistic weight loss of about 0.5–1kg (1–2 pounds) a week until you reach your ideal healthy weight.

The following tips may help.

- Reduce your portion sizes.
- Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.
- Choose wholegrain varieties of bread, pasta and cereals.
- Use lower-fat dairy foods, such as skimmed or semi-skimmed milk or lower-fat cheese such as feta, reduced-fat cheddar or cottage cheese.
- Go for lean cuts of meat and trim off as much fat as possible.
- Include beans and pulses in your diet.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Keep biscuits, cakes, chocolate and crisps for occasional treats.
- Take care when eating out, and remember that takeaways can be high in fat and calories.

Try to do some regular physical activity, such as brisk walking. Ideally this should be of moderate intensity, which means it should increase your heart rate, but you should still be able to hold a conversation.

Weight loss

If you've lost weight during your treatment, some simple changes to your diet can help. To maintain or put on weight, you need to take on more calories and more protein. You can do this by:

- adding extra oil, butter, margarine or cheese to savoury dishes
- making hot drinks with milk rather than water
- avoiding low-fat or so-called 'healthy option' foods.

Alcohol

Some studies suggest that women who drink large amounts of alcohol may be at an increased risk of developing breast cancer.

A balanced diet

There are many conflicting theories about diet and breast cancer, which can be confusing, but eating healthily, may make a difference to energy levels and general wellbeing.

For a healthy diet, it is important to:

- eat a variety of different foods & to eat the right amount to have a healthy weight
- eat plenty of foods rich in fibre & at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- limit foods that contain a lot of fat, especially animal (saturated) fat
- limit sugary food and drinks & lower salt intake
- drink around two litres of fluids a day (such as water, herbal tea, tea, coffee or low calorie drinks)

The eat-well plate

Try to eat a variety of foods from each of the four main food groups every day.

The eat-well plate shows the different types of foods we should eat and in what proportions.

- Plenty of fruit and vegetables. These provide low calorie nutrition and a range of vitamins, minerals and fibre. Adding in a handful at breakfast, lunch and dinner will count for 3 of your 5 a day.
- Plenty of bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods – choose wholegrain varieties whenever you can. These are important for energy. Aim for 1-3 handfuls worth at each meal.
- Some milk and dairy foods. Choose low fat or full fat versions depending on your weight and appetite.
- Some lean meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein

The eatwell plate

Use the eatwell plate to help you get the balance right. It shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group.



Department of Health in association with the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland

Courtesy: Breast Cancer Care, UK

Bone health

Bone health is important throughout life, and more so as one grows older. This is because bone loss increases as part of the natural ageing process, and this can lead to osteoporosis (a thinning of the bones that can lead to an increased risk of fracture).

Some breast cancer treatments including those which can lead to an early menopause (such as chemotherapy) or hormone therapies (particularly aromatase inhibitors) can affect bone health. These treatments affect the level of oestrogen in the body.

Oestrogen plays an important part in keeping bones strong and without it, bones will be weakened. A well-balanced diet will help obtaining all the vitamins and minerals one needs to maintain strong, healthy bones. It is particularly important to get enough calcium and vitamin D, which is needed to help the body absorb the calcium.

Vitamin D is available in plenty naturally from sunlight and from foods such as

- margarine
- low-fat spreads
- egg yolks
- oily fish such as herrings and sardines
- cod liver oil
- vitamin-D fortified breakfast cereals

Good sources of calcium include:

- milk and dairy products (including low-fat varieties) such as yoghurt, fromage frais and cheese
- calcium-fortified breakfast cereals
- dried fruit such as apricots and figs
- fish with edible bones such as anchovies, sardines, pilchards and whitebait
- green leafy vegetables like broccoli, watercress and curly kale
- pulses, beans and seeds such as kidney beans, green beans, baked beans and tofu (a vegetable protein made from soya beans)
- nuts and seeds such as almonds, brazil nuts, hazelnuts and sesame seeds
- okra.