

Adding Calories and Overcoming Appetite Loss during Cancer Treatment

UTAH CANCER SPECIALISTS

Getting in enough calories each day to maintain weight during cancer treatment

Why do I have no appetite? Both cancer and its treatment can cause people to lose weight unintentionally. Many cancer treatments, including chemotherapy and radiation, can leave people nauseated for days. **The Details:** *Cancer increases the release of “cytokines”, local “immune system” hormones that can suppress the appetite. Many chemotherapy drugs leave people nauseated, sometimes for days or even weeks. Radiation treatments can occasionally cause nausea, depending on the area being treated.*

Do I need to worry about a “healthy diet”? It is always important to eat healthy foods, but when nothing sounds good and you are losing weight, the single most important nutrient is calories. **The Details:** *“Healthy” depends on many things. Most people would benefit from more fruits and vegetables, and fewer fats and simple carbohydrates (like sugars and starches). However, the exact opposite is often true when people have cancer, at least in the short term. When you are losing weight unintentionally, the best source of calories is from fats and simple carbohydrates while fruits and vegetables can*

often increase nausea and diarrhea, making other problems worse. In the short term, we focus on keeping up your weight with a plan to return to a more wholesome diet later.

How do I address the problem of food itself suppressing my appetite? For many people with cancer, the smell of food suppresses the appetite. Try to have someone else prepare the food while you are in another part of the home. For the same reason, bland foods are less likely to suppress the appetite. **The Details:** *Sadly, our favorite foods are often the least appealing while we are undergoing cancer treatments. For most people, foods that have wonderful aromas and strong flavors are exactly the foods which turn off the appetite most, before you even get a bite in your mouth. Most people find room-temperature or cool foods suppress the appetite less.*



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How can I use fats and carbohydrates to get more calories? Fats are the most calorie-dense foods available. A little extra olive oil or vegetable oil can be added to lots of foods. Extra butter is a wonderful addition to mashed potatoes, breads, pastas and other dishes. You can also mix in cream or half-and-half to almost any soup, potatoes, oatmeal, etc. Nuts are high in fats, and peanut butter can be eaten plain or added to milkshakes. It would never be good to get all your calories from sugar, but sugar is the simplest carbohydrate and is very easily absorbed. You can add chocolate syrup or caramel to ice cream or desserts. The "BRAT" diet (Bananas, Rice, Applesauce & Toast, which pediatricians recommend for sick children) works because it provides a good source of calories without a lot of fiber that can upset the stomach. These bland, simple carbohydrate sources are also excellent vehicles for fats, butter, oils and nuts, so load up your rice with butter and your toast with peanut butter. **The Details:** *Think about the foods you already eat and enjoy, then think of ways to add a few calories here*

and there with extra butter or oils. Add nuts and sugars when needed. Remember, the real secret to keeping up your weight is to add a few extra calories to every single bite you can get down.

What if I still can't keep up my weight up? When you can't keep up your weight with changes in diet, we sometimes turn to medications. Work with your medical team to ensure your nausea is well controlled, and consider getting a palliative care physician involved. **The Details:** *They may add olanzapine for delayed nausea, mirtazapine to increase appetite, or steroids like megestrol to help keep up weight. THC products can also be helpful in some circumstances. In addition, getting depression and anxiety under control can often make a very big difference in improving your appetite.*



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