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## Coping with cancer's effect on the diet

Jennifer Anderson<sup>1</sup>

### Quick Facts

- Weight loss is a common problem of patients that undergo cancer therapy.
- Cancer patients who retain weight and maintain a good nutritional state have fewer complications from treatment.
- Side-effects of cancer and/or its treatment that may result in weight loss include reduced appetite, food taste changes, diarrhea, constipation and difficulty swallowing.
- Diet changes can be made to overcome or reduce many of these side effects.

Weight loss is a common problem of patients undergoing cancer therapy, but weight loss as a result of cancer need not be accepted as inevitable. In fact, it is to the patient's advantage to avoid or prevent weight loss. Research shows cancer patients who retain weight and maintain a good nutritional state have fewer complications from treatment—be it chemotherapy, radiation therapy or surgery—than those who don't. The results are shorter hospital stays, reduced illness, fewer infections, full benefit of treatment, and better maintenance of strength and sense of well-being.

Cancer's effect on diet may fall into two categories: 1. side-effects of the disease; and 2. side-effects of treatment.

### Side-Effects of the Disease

**Reduced appetite.** Sometimes decreased appetite is a problem. If the desire to eat decreases as the day progresses, why not make breakfast the big meal of the day? Don't feel restricted to typical breakfast foods either. If some people feel like eating steak, a baked potato and a salad they should do it! On the other hand, some people find eating five or six smaller meals a day works better than eating two or three larger meals.

**Food taste changes.** Cancer often affects the taste buds and most commonly reduces the ability to taste sweet. This not only changes the taste of sweets and desserts, but also fruits and vegetables. Use extra sugar with many desserts to improve the taste, or to provide the accustomed taste. Adding a teaspoon of sugar to cooking water or glazing vegetables such as carrots may help improve vegetable flavors.

Some people experience an unusual dislike to certain foods, tastes or odors. This develops when unpleasant symptoms are tied to a food recently eaten. Save your favorite foods for times when you feel well. It is best not to eat one to two hours before treatment or therapy. A person who no longer enjoys beef or pork may find chicken, fish, eggs, milk products or legumes more appealing. Marinating meats or cooking them with sauces or tomatoes may help improve the flavor. Also eating meats cold may be more palatable.

A third potential taste change is an increased likeness for tart flavors. Add lemon juice to foods to make them taste better. A cancer patient may enjoy grapefruit, cranberry or other tart juices.

### Side-Effects of Treatment

**Surgery.** The effects of surgery on diet vary greatly depending on the location of the tumor and the surgical procedure used. If surgery is scheduled in the cancer treatment, talk to the doctor to learn what side-effects might develop. When a side-effect does develop the doctor or registered dietitian can assist in coping with the diet.

**Chemotherapy.** Chemotherapy destroys rapidly dividing cells, such as cancer cells. It also destroys normal body cells that divide rapidly such as those in bone marrow and those that line the small intestine. The side-effects include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or constipation, which may adversely affect dietary intake. All these effects, will end a few days after the chemotherapy treatment ends.

**Radiation therapy.** The dietary side-effects of

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radiation therapy depend on the location of the tumor. Therapy for a head or neck tumor often causes swallowing pain, dry mouth and altered taste. Swallowing pain may be reduced by consuming soft-textured foods such as casseroles, egg products, puddings and liquids. Dry mouth can be helped by eating sauces and gravies with foods. Sucking on hard candies or using artificial saliva will help moisten the mouth.

Alteration of taste (also called "mouth blindness") seems to have a greater effect on diet than the other side-effects to the head and neck area. Spicy foods, strong flavored foods, or coarsely textured fruits and vegetables are most likely to be acceptable to people with mouth blindness. Unfortunately, mouth blindness may continue for up to a year after radiation therapy is discontinued.

Radiation therapy for an abdominal or pelvic tumor often encourages nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

## Other Resources

A doctor is the best ally in cancer treatment. Keep the doctor informed of diet problems, treat-

ment difficulties, and changes in condition. Hospital registered dietitians and those in private practice are available to help with dietary problems. They can help patients understand the effects cancer and its treatment may have on diet.

The American Cancer Society can provide names of support groups or other services, such as Meals on Wheels, available to cancer patients in the community. Contact the local American Cancer Society or write the national office 777 Third Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

*Diet and Nutrition—A Resource for Parents of Children with Cancer* can be ordered from the Public Document Center, P.O. Box 4007, Pueblo, CO 81003. Identify the booklet by code number, 017-042-00148-0 when ordering.

Another helpful booklet is *Eating Hints, Recipes and Tips for Better Nutrition During Cancer Treatment*. Obtain free copies from the Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, MD 20205. They have a toll-free telephone: 1-800-638-6694, for more information. Call the Cancer hotline, 1-800-4-CANCER for help and excellent information.

**Table 1: Coping with cancer's effect on the diet.**

Troubled with	Try
Nausea or vomiting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat five or six smaller meals instead of three larger meals.</li> <li>• Drink beverages one-half hour to one hour before meals instead of with meals.</li> <li>• Eat dry or salty foods—toast, crackers, corn chips or pretzels.</li> <li>• Avoid rich or highly sweetened foods.</li> <li>• Avoid smells that cause nausea.</li> <li>• Avoid high-fat foods.</li> </ul>
Constipation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drink plenty of fluids (eight cups per day), especially hot beverages and fruit juices.</li> <li>• Light exercise such as short walks or light housework may help.</li> <li>• Include foods high in fiber or bulk in your diet—raw fruits and vegetables, whole grains, bran.</li> </ul>
Diarrhea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat cheese and yogurt.</li> <li>• Avoid foods high in bulk or fiber—raw vegetables, whole grains, bran.</li> <li>• Avoid foods that cause gas or cramping—beans, cabbage, broccoli, spicy foods, carbonated beverages.</li> </ul>
Dry mouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat sauces and gravies with food.</li> <li>• Suck on hard sugarless candies or chew gum.</li> <li>• Dunk foods in beverages, such as coffee, tea or milk.</li> <li>• Take a swallow of beverage with each bite of food.</li> <li>• Use artificial saliva.</li> </ul>
"Mouth blindness"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try highly spiced foods—pizza, spaghetti, chili.</li> <li>• Eat strongly flavored foods—sauerkraut, cabbage, Limburger cheese.</li> <li>• Emphasize texture in meals—crisp lettuce and fruits, creamy mashed potatoes, soft bread, crunchy toast.</li> </ul>
Taste changes— Reduced ability to taste sweetness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add a teaspoon of sugar to vegetable cooking water.</li> <li>• Glaze vegetables such as carrots.</li> <li>• Increase the sugar in desserts and try new recipes.</li> </ul>
Unusual dislike for meat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replace beef or pork with poultry, fish, eggs, milk products, legumes.</li> <li>• Marinate meats.</li> <li>• Cook meats in sauces or with tomatoes.</li> <li>• Eat meats cold or at room temperature.</li> </ul>
Increased likeness for tart flavors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add lemon juice to foods.</li> <li>• Drink tart beverages—lemonade, grapefruit, cranberry juice.</li> </ul>
Appetite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat during best times.</li> <li>• Use foods easy to prepare and eat.</li> <li>• Eat smaller meals.</li> <li>• Use liquid meals.</li> <li>• Don't drink with meals.</li> <li>• Eat foods that are nutrient dense.</li> </ul>
Swallowing or chewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use softer foods.</li> <li>• Drink with a straw.</li> <li>• Refer to <i>NonChew Cookbook</i>, Wilson, 1985. Wilson Publishing.</li> </ul>