Blood Cancer NZ

EVERY BLOOD CANCER . EVERY PERSON . EVERY JOURNEY

Eating well

An information sheet for patients, families & whānau

Maintaining a healthy level of nutrition is always important, but is vital if you have a blood cancer. Once you start to undergo treatments like chemotherapy, ensuring you are giving your body the right nutrients can help you tolerate treatment better. Good nutrition will help your body to fight infection when it is at its weakest, and will also help you to recover more quickly.

Symptoms from your cancer or side effects from your treatments may make it difficult to eat and drink as much as you need to. Your body may also require more energy (calories) than it usually does which can make it harder to maintain your weight.

Eating well during treatment

There are many different types of treatments for blood cancers and blood conditions. Treatments may include chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapies, steroids, radiotherapy and/or a stem cell transplant.

Your health care team will be able to give you specific information about your treatment plan and possible side effects.

Below are some common side effects of treatments, and tips to help you continue eating and drinking to get the nutrition your body needs.

Nausea and/or vomiting

- Eat frequently throughout the day. An empty stomach can make nausea (feeling sick) worse.
- Smaller portions may be easier to manage than full meals.
- If the smell of certain foods makes you feel sick, try eating foods cold (they smell less), have ready-made meals or ask someone else to cook, and have the windows open to get fresh air.
- Try dry or salty foods such as plain toast or crackers.
- Try foods containing peppermint or ginger, e.g. peppermint tea, flat ginger ale, ginger biscuits.
- Sit upright for 30 minutes after eating.
- Take regular sips of cool fluids, e.g. lemonade, ginger ale or cordial, or try sucking on ice blocks.
- Speak to your health care team about anti-nausea medications (antiemetics) and take these regularly, as prescribed. Inform your health care team if these are not effective, as there may be other options to control the nausea.

Reduced appetite

- Have small, frequent meals and snacks.
- Choose foods that you enjoy.
- Try a variety of foods. Your taste can change from day to day, so try foods again after a few days if you don't tolerate them the first time.
- Have pre-prepared meals and snacks available for when you don't feel like cooking.
- Place a snack basket by your favourite chair, in the car or in your handbag.

- Choose nutritious fluids when you aren't feeling up to eating, e.g. smoothies, milky Milo.

Taste changes

- Clean your teeth and tongue regularly with a soft toothbrush.
- If your taste is dulled, try adding strong flavours such as mustard, ginger, tomato, onion, chutneys, cheese, vinegar, extra herbs and spices.
- Squeeze lemon juice onto foods to enhance the flavour.
- If things taste too salty, add a pinch of sugar to balance the flavour; if things are too sweet, add a pinch of salt.
- Eat sharp-tasting foods such as lemon, lime or pineapple before each meal – it can cut through the bad taste.
- If meat tastes unpleasant, try marinating it before cooking. Alternatively, choose other protein-rich foods such as fish, milk, cheese, eggs, lentils or beans.
- If things taste metallic, try using plastic or wooden cutlery.

Mouth/throat pain

- Choose moist, soft foods – adding sauce, gravy, cream or custard can help soften foods.
- Finely chop, mince or mash food.
- Try stewing or casseroling meat to make it more tender.
- Avoid spicy or acidic foods.
- Use a numbing gel at least half an hour before eating.
- Try drinking fluids through a straw.
- Speak to your health care team. They can do a proper assessment and discuss pain relief options, using an appropriate mouthwash and how/when to do mouth care.
- You may need to supplement your food intake with nutritious fluids or an oral nutritional supplement – speak to your health care team or dietitian about this.

Constipation

- Ensure you are drinking enough fluid (see Fluids, to the right, for more tips).
- Make sure you are getting enough fibre. Increase fibre gradually by adding high-fibre foods such as fruit, vegetables, whole grains, brown rice, wheat bran, oats, nuts, seeds.
- Try eating fruit or fruit juices high in sorbitol, e.g. apples, pears, apricots, plums, prunes.
- Establish a daily routine, e.g. set aside 10 minutes after breakfast when you will not be interrupted. Try not to ignore the urge to pass a stool, as this can make constipation worse.
- Be active if possible – a short walk can help keep your bowels regular.
- Speak to your health care team or pharmacist about your medications – some pain relief and anti-nausea medications can be constipating, and may require laxatives to be taken alongside them. Note: dietary measures will usually not help constipation caused by medication.
- If you are at risk of bowel obstruction, speak to your health care team before making any of the above changes.

Diarrhoea

- Limit tea and coffee to three cups per day. Caffeine is a stimulant and can lead to loose stools.
- Avoid sugar-free sweets, gum or fizzy drinks as artificial sweeteners may trigger loose stools.
- Try foods that can help thicken your stools, e.g. banana, potato, pasta, rice, stewed apples, tapioca.
- Let your health care team know if you are having frequent episodes of diarrhoea, or if your diarrhoea is worsening.

Dry mouth

- Choose soft, minced foods with extra gravies or sauces to make them moist and easier to eat.

- Use mouth washes regularly and maintain good oral hygiene.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and tobacco as these can make a dry mouth worse.
- Ask your health care team or pharmacist about a saliva replacement gel or spray.

Fluids

- On average, most people need to drink 1.5–2.5 litres of fluids per day.
- Carry a drink bottle around with you, or have a jug of water by your chair or bed.
- Many people struggle with the taste of water during treatment. Try adding lemon juice or flavouring to it, or try alternatives such as milk, tea, Milo or smoothies.

If you are losing weight

- Record your weight, so you can track how much you are losing.
- Increase the calories in your food by adding cheese, cream, butter or oils, nuts or nut butters.
- Add snacks between your main meals and have supper/dessert.
- Let your health care team know if you are losing weight and ask to see a dietitian if your weight continues to decrease. A dietitian can help manage changes in your appetite and weight, help you deal with the side effects of treatment, advise you about foods, vitamins and supplements, and help you to meet your specific nutrition needs. Unintentional weight loss can make you weaker, affect your energy levels, and impact your treatment.

Food safety

- Check the use-by date of foods before you buy.
- Avoid food with damaged packaging, and fruit and vegetables that are damaged or overripe.
- Wash and dry your hands before and after preparing food.
- Use clean surfaces and utensils for food preparation.
- Wash fruit and vegetables well.
- Cover leftovers and refrigerate immediately. Hot food should be cooled for 30 minutes before being refrigerated. Refrigerated food should be eaten within two days and reheated until hot before eating.
- If you have a weakened immune system, you may also need to temporarily avoid some foods – speak to your health care team or dietitian about this.

Further information on food safety can be obtained from the Ministry for Primary Industries *www.mpi.govt.nz/food-safety/food-safety-for-consumers/people-with-low-immunity/*

Eating well after treatment

After treatment, it is important to eat a variety of foods to ensure your body is getting the nutrients it needs. Eating well can help you regain your strength, increase your energy, and help you feel better. A healthy, balanced diet can also help reduce the risk of developing other cancers and health conditions in the future, such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

The following recommendations are based on the Ministry of Health Eating and Activity Guidelines, the World Cancer Research Fund Cancer Prevention Recommendations and the 2020 American Cancer Society Guideline for Diet and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention.

Aim to include the following in your diet:

- At least three servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit per day.
- At least six servings of grain foods per day – choose mostly whole grains.
- At least two servings per day of milk, milk products or milk alternatives. If you choose to have plant-based milk instead of cows' milk, choose calcium-fortified options.
- At least two servings per day of legumes, nuts or seeds or at least one serving of seafood, eggs, poultry or red meat (if choosing red meat, aim for less than 500g per week).

Choose foods that are mostly 'whole' and less processed. Choose unsaturated fats over saturated fats, and foods that are low in salt (sodium) and low in added sugar.

Keeping well for optimal future health:

- Minimise processed and red meat, sugar-sweetened beverages and highly processed foods.
- Eat a variety of fruit and vegetables – ideally of a variety of colours.
- Increase fibre – good sources of fibre include whole grains, beans, legumes, fruit and vegetables.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Avoid alcohol – or if you do choose to drink, limit to two standard drinks per day (men) or one standard drink per day (women), with some alcohol-free days.
- Do regular physical activity – aim for 30-60 minutes moderate-intensity exercise per day.

Questions and notes

Important information available online

For more information and to download other fact sheets, see our website **bloodcancer.org.nz**

Contact us

For nationwide enquiries about our services, and support for health care professionals, patients and whānau.

Visit **bloodcancer.org.nz**

Freephone **0800 15 10 15**

Email **info@bloodcancer.org.nz**

Or visit one of our Support Services offices in Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington, Christchurch or Dunedin.

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