

Nutrition questions to ask your care team

Dietitian, Meagan Atcheson, shares a list of nutrition questions that you can ask your care team and gives her advice respectively.



Healthy nutrition is a critical part of the successful treatment of cancer. Here are important questions to ask your care team.

Q SHOULD I CHANGE MY DIET?

A You certainly don't have to, but dietitians would always encourage you to retain or adopt as many healthy eating habits as you can, during treatment and beyond.

Q HOW WILL GOOD NUTRITION HELP ME DURING CANCER TREATMENT?

A Eating well and maintaining good nutrition before, during, and after cancer treatment can help you maintain strength and energy while you go through treatment. A healthy diet can also help you deal better with any side effects that you might experience from treatment.

Q HOW DOES A DIETITIAN ASSIST IN MY CARE?

A A dietitian works with you to optimise your diet and provides one-on-one counselling to address your unique nutritional needs, depending on the type and stage of your cancer and the treatment you're receiving. The dietitian works closely with your doctors and other members of your cancer care team and is available for individual appointments with you, your loved ones, and caretakers to provide diet education and ongoing support.

Q ARE THERE ANY FOODS TO AVOID WHILE HAVING TREATMENT?

A If your treatment has caused side effects, like nausea, taste changes or mouth sores, you probably have already started your own mental list of foods you would much rather steer clear of.

However, there are some foods that no matter how good they sound are probably best avoided due to the risk of foodborne illness.

Because some treatments can weaken your immune system until at least a few weeks after they have ended (longer if you had a stem cell/bone marrow transplant), food poisoning is not something to tempt. The results of developing a foodborne illness can be serious.

Avoid lightly cooked or raw fish, such as sushi, soft-cooked eggs or foods that contain raw eggs, such as homemade mayonnaise, unpasteurised cheeses and dairy products as well as unwashed fruits or vegetables.

Q IS IT SAFE TO TAKE VITAMINS, HERBAL PRODUCTS AND OTHER DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS DURING TREATMENT?

A Not all supplements are safe or effective, especially during cancer treatment. Always talk with your cancer care team before taking a dietary supplement, even if it's one that you have taken in the past.

Some dietary supplements, including herbal products, can interfere with your cancer treatment. If you adopt a healthy balanced diet, you should be able to get all of the essential nutrients that your body needs through food alone. However, there are a few exceptions like vitamin D, B12 or iron if your blood levels for these are low. You can ask your doctor to test them.

Q WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF MALNUTRITION?

A Some signs and symptoms of malnutrition include: weight loss; a lack of appetite or interest in food or drink; tiredness and irritability; an inability to concentrate; always feeling cold; depression; loss of fat, muscle mass and body tissue; a higher risk of getting sick and taking longer to heal or longer healing time for wounds.

Q WHAT ARE THE COMMON SIDE EFFECTS THAT COULD MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT TO GET ADEQUATE NUTRITION?

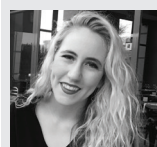
A Cancer treatments, especially chemotherapy, can cause sudden and dramatic changes in taste and smell; nausea and vomiting; diarrhoea; loss of appetite; sores in the mouth and throat; trouble swallowing; dry mouth; and fatigue.

The likelihood that a person with cancer will experience at least one treatment-induced side effect is high. Doctors will provide preventative medicine and tips to help but it would always be a good idea to talk to your dietitian about how to manage these side effects too.

Q WHAT SHOULD I EAT IF I DECIDE TO EXERCISE DURING CANCER TREATMENT?

A If you feel well enough to start exercising, and if your oncologist and care team have approved a fitness routine, then you can certainly work out during treatment. It's important to start slow. Try walking, yoga or stretching before working your way up to a more active routine. Or ask your doctor to refer you to an oncology physiotherapist to assist. Make sure to eat a well-balanced diet focusing on protein (eggs, fish, chicken, dairy, legumes, etc.) and make sure to hydrate with plenty of water.

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MEET THE EXPERT

Meagan Atcheson is a registered dietitian who focuses specifically in oncology. She is a plant centric foodie who promotes a nourishing approach to health and wellness using evidence based research and guidelines only.