

Poor Appetite

Loss of appetite (the desire to eat) is a common side effect of cancer treatments. It can be made worse by stress, emotions, pain, fatigue, and certain medications. Not eating well can lead to weight loss, weakness, fatigue, and malnutrition, which can contribute to a poor recovery between treatments, possibly resulting in treatment interruption. Eating well during your cancer treatment and recovery is an important part of taking care of yourself.

Eating Tips for a Poor Appetite

- Eat small amounts throughout the day instead of eating 3 large meals. If you have a hard time remembering to eat, try setting a timer to remind yourself.
- Schedule meals and snacks throughout the day, ideally within 1 hour of waking and then every 2 to 3 hours. Do not wait to feel hungry to eat, and do not skip meals.
- Make every bite count by choosing high-calorie and high-protein foods whenever you eat.
- Take advantage of times when you feel hungry and eat more at those times. If you feel hungrier when you first wake up, try eating a larger breakfast.
- Use snacks to make up for lost calories at meals by choosing high-protein and high-calorie options like half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a bowl of yogurt with fruit, scrambled eggs with cheese, or a granola bar.
- Keep portable snacks near you at all times so that you can eat whenever you feel hungry.
- Try eating a bedtime snack like cheese and crackers or toast with peanut butter. This will help to get in extra nutrients without affecting your appetite for your next meal.
- Choose milkshakes, smoothies, or high-calorie, high-protein nutritional drinks if a meal sounds like too much. Drinks are often more appealing and can be easier to consume.
- Avoid drinking large amounts of liquids with your meals. This can make you feel too full to eat foods with more calories and protein.

Tips for Improving Your Appetite

- Move around when possible. Walking and other gentle forms of exercise, especially right before eating, can help to make your appetite better.
- Make your surroundings cheerful and eat with friends or family. The distraction of a pretty table, flowers, or soft music may help you eat better.
- Keep a list of favorite recipes and ideas for meals ready for friends and family members who offer to help with cooking or shopping.
- Keep your pantry and freezer full of foods that make quick and easy meals and snacks, such as single-serving entrées and ready-to-eat packaged foods.
- Use the clock, TV shows, or commercial breaks to remind you to take a sip, or have a snack.
- Discuss the medications you take with your medical team. For example, some medications for constipation, nausea, or pain can cause poor appetite. The team may recommend a different medicine, a different dose of medicine, or a new medication schedule.
- Ask your doctor if a medication to increase your appetite could be right for you.