

Information resources for families

Eating well during treatment

Tips for helping children eat well when receiving treatment for cancer

This information gives some ideas on how to maximise energy and nutrients in your child's diet. Not everybody reacts exactly the same way to treatment so it is important to be aware of good nutrition to help your child cope with any diet-related problems that might occur. Regardless of any eating difficulties or effects of treatment, good nutrition is important for the whole family.

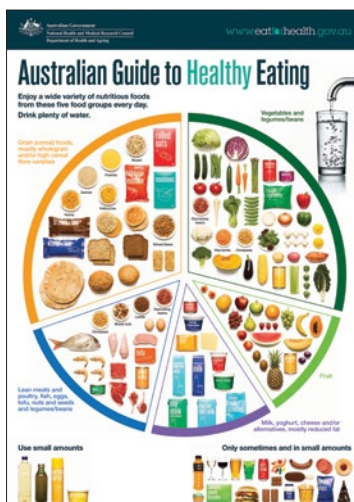
Offer a balanced diet

Good nutrition will help your child to:

- maintain adequate growth
- help the body fight infections
- cope better with chemotherapy
- feel better and have more energy.

A balanced diet is one that contains a variety of foods from the major food groups. These include:

- breads and cereals including rice, pasta and breakfast cereals
- fruits including fresh, tinned and dried
- vegetables including fresh, dried, frozen and tinned
- meat and meat alternatives such as beef, chicken, fish, eggs and legumes
- dairy foods including milk, cheese and yoghurt
- fats including butter, margarine, oil and cream.



Alternative diets and complementary and alternative medicines

Many diets and dietary supplements are suggested as a treatment for cancer. These may not have the essential nutrients for normal growth and good health and may be costly, hard to follow and impractical. Some may even be dangerous. It is essential to discuss any changes to diet, or plans to take a food, vitamin or mineral supplement with your child's consultant oncologist. If you would like some more detailed information ask your doctor, dietitian or nurse for a copy of *Understanding complementary therapies: a guide for people with cancer, their families and friends* (Cancer Council, 2008).

Starting treatment

You may find that your child eats a little less than usual at the beginning of treatment and during chemotherapy sessions. Although there may be a small weight loss at this time, your child will usually regain the weight once they are feeling better.

Try not to bribe your child with sweets and food treats as you may find they will only eat or demand these foods later and want less of their usual 'healthy' foods. Try reward charts or sticker charts to encourage your child to eat the right foods.

It is best to offer foods that are the same as what the rest of the family is eating and that you know your child likes.

Although your child may seem fussier at times, continue to offer a variety of foods, even if they are sometimes refused. Try to stick with your usual routines, but be flexible, as your child may not always eat the same way depending on their appetite. Mealtimes may take a little longer at times, but try not to let them last longer than 30–40 minutes.

Some of the side effects of chemotherapy may alter eating habits. See your dietitian for advice and information on how to deal with the most common side effects.

Good food hygiene

During treatment your child's ability to fight infections is reduced. Sometimes, bacteria can grow in food and cause gastroenteritis, which results in nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Follow these guidelines to ensure good food hygiene; they are particularly important when your child's blood count is low:

- Wash your hands before preparing any food.
- Always wash fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Store raw and cooked food in different sections of the fridge.
- Keep raw meats away from all other foods.
- Use a separate chopping board for raw meats.
- Defrost and cook foods thoroughly, particularly meats.
- Never use unpasteurised dairy products.
- Do not keep hot foods at room temperature. Keep hot foods in the oven and cold foods in the fridge.
- Check 'use by' and 'best by' dates of foods.

Eating during low blood counts

If your child's blood count is very low, avoid foods that have a higher risk of bacterial contamination:

- take away foods, particularly if you are unsure how long they have been cooked, or if they are not kept very hot
- paté and soft cheeses such as blue vein, ricotta, camembert and brie
- fresh fruits that are very difficult to wash such as berries
- soft serve ice cream
- bought pre-prepared salads such as coleslaw and potato salad
- uncooked/fermented deli meats such as salami and mettwurst
- uncooked herbs or herbal supplements
- reheated food.

Hints for eating when your child feels unwell

- Offer small serves of food more frequently – perhaps five to six times a day to avoid getting too full or too empty.
- Offer cold foods that have little smell.
- Don't force your child, but encourage and praise your child when he/she eats.
- Eat meals in a well ventilated room to clear the smell of foods away.
- Sit and eat with your child.
- Snacks of salty dry biscuits and fizzy drinks may be better tolerated.
- Fluids are important, offer these regularly to sip.
- Offer a variety of foods.
- Keep portions of favourite foods in the freezer for quick access.
- Keep nutritious snacks handy so your child can get to them.
- Try not to fill up on low nutrient foods such as cordials, soft drinks and lollies as there will be less room for other better foods.
- Try foods that contain ginger such as ginger ale and ginger biscuits.

What if my child loses weight?

Children with cancer have increased calorie and protein needs. If your child loses weight and eats poorly, you should speak to your doctor, dietitian or nurse for further advice. Your dietitian can provide information about high-energy eating.

For more information about paediatric cancer, please visit www.vics.org.au/pics

Good nutrition will help your child cope better with treatment.