

When illness affects your appetite

Information and guidance for people in palliative care, their families and carers.

NORMAL CHANGES TO EXPECT

Severe illnesses such as cancer cause the body to produce chemicals, which break down muscle and fat. These chemicals also “trick” the part of the brain that controls appetite.

The brain starts to think that you are full after only a few mouthfuls, or even after no food at all. Because of this, your appetite becomes smaller or may even disappear.

Those who care for you may worry that you are starving or feeling hungry. This is not the case. The changes that occur in your body during serious illness are very different from those that happen when you are in good health and do not have enough to eat. When you are seriously ill, your body may not be able to build itself up. The body recognises that it can no longer use food as before and your appetite becomes smaller. The focus of nutritional care is symptom management. Medication can help, but it is often not possible to relieve these symptoms completely.

WHY AM I EATING LESS?

When you have a severe illness, you may lose weight and your appetite may become smaller than usual.

SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT

DRY OR SORE MOUTH

Frequent mouth care (brush teeth gently with a soft toothbrush). Keep your lips moist with lip balm. Try sucking small pieces of ice or small ice lollies instead of drinking.

TASTE CHANGES

Enhance the taste of meals and experiment with herbs or spices. Even very small amounts of your favourite food and drink can provide comfort.

CONSTIPATION

Try to drink enough. A warm drink in the morning may help. Have soluble fibre foods such as oats, apples, pears, bananas, broccoli and carrots. Be as active as you can.

DIARRHOEA

Sip sweet (cola or fruit juice) and salty (clear soups or beef extract) drinks to replace the fluids you have lost. Try to eat every 2-3 hours.

NAUSEA AND VOMITING

Try eating dry foods such as crackers, biscuits or toast, salty foods such as crisps or soup, and cold food and drinks.

Eat little and often. Use convenience foods if cooking smells affect your appetite.

Have some fresh air.

FEELING TIRED OR BREATHLESS WHEN EATING

Choose easy to chew foods you enjoy. Add sauces or gravy to keep food moist which provides extra nourishment.



WHAT ABOUT FOOD?

Small portions of food, which do not need a lot of chewing may be easier to manage. If you do not feel like eating a full meal, have part of the meal instead. Every mouthful matters.

Choose the foods you enjoy and are able to manage. Food presentation matters

Try eating food that you enjoy, aiming for little and often.

Eat smaller portions of food, served on smaller plates. Use your favourite plates, bowls and cutlery.

Try to eat regularly. Aim for 6 small meals daily.

Slow down, take your time to enjoy your food and take smaller mouthfuls.

WHAT ABOUT DRINKS?

Small cups or glasses may be easier for you to manage.

Even if you can only manage a very small drink, you may find it easier to drink from a full cup or glass, as you won't have to tip your head back as far, and swallowing might be easier for you.

Slow down, take your time to enjoy your drinks and take smaller mouthfuls.

Sip drinks regularly to keep your mouth clean and fresh.

This information is general advice, if you normally follow a special diet, please consult your Dietitian and or Speech and Language Therapist.

Snacks & nutritious drinks

- Mini tub of yogurt, fromage frais
- Mini ice cream lolly or mini tub of ice cream, dessert or custard
- Pieces of soft fruit such as mango, melon, grapes, orange segments, tinned fruit
- Favourite sweets or squares of chocolate
- Small scone with butter and jam or lemon curd, cake and custard
- Mini tub of cream cheese or cheese spread – these can be served with softbread or crackers
- Small sandwich with a tasty filling such as chicken mayonnaise, salmon and cream cheese
- Cocktail sausages, mini sausage rolls, mini quiches, mini pork pies or mini scotch eggs
- Cheese and dips
- Crisps, nuts and dried fruit
- Milk / high protein milk
- Milky coffee
- Milky tea
- Hot chocolate
- Malted milk drinks
- Smoothies/yoghurt drinks
- Iced coffee
- Fizzy drinks
- Fruit juice
- Milkshakes

