

How to eat well after your cancer diagnosis

For people with cancer and cancer survivors that want to make healthy lifestyle changes

This booklet will give you information about:


- why healthy eating is important
- weight gain after a cancer diagnosis
- what healthy eating looks like
- how to practice mindful eating
- how to meal plan
- why physical activity is important
- if weight loss is right for you
- where to find more information



Why is healthy eating important?

Everyone is affected differently by cancer. So is their eating. Some people find it hard to eat enough. Others eat more than usual. Other people do not notice any changes.

This booklet is for people who want to learn about healthy eating, and do not have symptoms that make it hard to eat.

 **If you eat less than usual or have lost weight without trying, talk to a dietitian.** These can be signs your body is not getting enough nutrition. This booklet may not be right for you at this time.

After a cancer diagnosis there is no scientific research that any specific food or diet, like ketogenic, vegan, or fasting, can slow cancer growth.

Focus on building a healthy lifestyle that includes a variety of foods and regular physical activity. This can:

- give you energy
- keep your body strong during treatment and recovery
- lower your risk of cancer recurrence (cancer coming back after treatment) or a new cancer diagnosis
- lower your risk of nutrition-related chronic (long-term) diseases like type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis
- make the quality of your everyday life better.

Why did I gain weight after my diagnosis?

Some people think that when you have cancer you lose weight. Some people gain weight during and after cancer treatment. Some of the reasons people gain weight may be out of their control. Causes of weight gain include:

- hormone therapy which is mostly used for people with breast or prostate cancer
- some chemotherapy drugs which can change your metabolism (how your body changes food into energy), hormones, or cause swelling
- some drugs, like steroids, which can increase appetite or cause swelling
- eating more to control symptoms like nausea
- doing less physical activity because of fatigue (feeling tired) or changes in your normal routine
- eating more or picking high-calorie comfort foods to manage strong feelings like stress and anxiety.

Talk with your health-care team to understand why you may gain weight.

It is not always possible to control your weight. You can make eating choices that have a positive effect on your health no matter what your weight is. During cancer treatment and recovery pick foods that you enjoy eating and nourish your body.

What does healthy eating look like?

Canada's Food Guide encourages a pattern of eating that includes a variety of healthy foods and is associated with positive health outcomes. Canada's Food Guide Plate shows how these healthy foods can fit into the meals you eat each day. Go to food-guide.canada.ca for more information.

Eat a variety of healthy foods each day

Have plenty of
vegetables and fruits

Eat protein foods

Make water
your drink
of choice



Choose
whole grain
foods

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How do I follow a healthy eating pattern?

An eating pattern is what you regularly eat and drink. A healthy eating pattern includes a variety of foods that give your body the nutrients (protein, carbohydrate, fat, vitamins, and minerals) it needs to stay healthy and help you feel well.

To build a balanced meal make:

- ½ your plate vegetables and fruits
- ¼ of your plate whole grain foods (see page 7 for more information)
- ¼ of your plate protein foods (see page 6 for more information).

Keep these amounts the same if you have a snack, eat from a bowl, or have a mixed dish like soup, curry, or casserole.

There is no right amount of food to eat. Eat more or less food depending how hungry you are.



This soup is a mix of vegetables, whole grain pasta, and beans (protein). This soup is a mixed dish that has the amounts of a healthy meal.

More information:

- Canada's Food Guide: [Make healthy meals with Canada's Food Guide](#)
- Unlock Food: [Canada's Food Guide](#)

Why should I eat a variety of foods?

Different foods have different nutrients that your body needs to work well. Eat a variety of foods to help your body meet its nutritional needs.

Protein foods

Foods like meat, fish, eggs, milk, nuts, seeds, and legumes (dried beans, peas, and lentils) are high in protein.

Protein is important during cancer treatment (chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery) because it can help:

- build muscle when done with exercise
- repair healthy cells that are damaged during treatment
- build a strong immune system.



Carbohydrate foods

Include carbohydrates in your meals and snacks.

Carbohydrates are the body's main source of energy.

Grains, fruit, starchy vegetables (like potatoes, squash, and plantain), beans, and milk all have carbohydrates. Your body breaks down carbohydrates into sugar to use as energy.

Sugar is a simple carbohydrate. Foods that are high in sugar, like cookies, cake, and sugary drinks break down quickly in your body. These foods usually have lots of calories but little healthy nutrients. Eat these foods less often and in smaller amounts.

Fibre

Fibre is the part of fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grain foods that your body does not break down. You may also hear fibre called “roughage.”

Fibre can help:

- you have regular bowel movements (poo)
- keep you full for longer
- keep your digestive tract healthy
- lower your cholesterol
- control your blood sugars.

If you do not eat fibre, it can cause gas and bloating for a while. Slowly add more high-fibre foods to what you eat.

Whole-grain foods

Whole-grain foods, like barley, bulgur, faro, quinoa, brown rice, oats, or whole grain bread, pasta, crackers and breakfast cereal, include all parts of the grain. This means they have carbohydrates and fibre.

Whole grain foods give your body energy and fibre. Pick the whole-grain version of food most often instead of refined-grain or “white” foods like white bread, white rice, or white noodles.



Vegetables and fruit

Vegetables and fruit are usually high in fibre, vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and low in calories.

All vegetables and fruits are great choices. Pick any vegetable or fruit you enjoy eating!

The natural sugar in fruit is not a health concern, since there is also healthy fibre and micronutrients in fruit. Fruit juice has the fibre removed. Drink fruit juice less often and in smaller amounts.

If you want a fruit drink, use whole fruit and vegetables to make high-fibre smoothies.



Fat

Fat helps your body absorb some vitamins, build healthy cells, control hormones, and gives you energy.

Pick healthy fats most often.

Plant sources of healthy fat include vegetable oils, like olive, canola, and peanut oil, avocados, nuts, and seeds.

Fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, sardines, and tuna are sources of healthy omega-3 fats.

If you eat a lot of saturated fat it can cause “bad cholesterol” levels in your body to be higher. Eat foods that are high in saturated fat like butter, ghee, lard, fatty meats, high-fat dairy products, and some tropical oils like palm oil and coconut oil less often and in smaller amounts.

Micronutrients

Micronutrients include vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and phytochemicals. Your body needs very small amounts of these nutrients to work well.

Unless your doctor tells you otherwise, you do not need to take vitamin or mineral supplements. Your body needs the same amount of vitamins and minerals as before your cancer diagnosis.

Some research suggests that big doses of vitamins and minerals may affect how well your cancer treatment works.



The best way to get enough micronutrients is to eat a variety of foods. This includes protein foods, whole grains, and vegetables and fruits of different colours.

What are processed foods?

Food processing is any changes that happen to food after it is grown and before it reaches your plate.

A whole food is not processed. It is in its natural state like an apple, egg, or barley.

Minimally-processed foods like canned beans, unsweetened applesauce, and plain yogurt have only been changed a little so they are easy to store and eat. Their nutrition content is about the same as whole food.

Eat whole and minimally-processed foods most often.

Highly-processed foods have many ingredients that have been changed a lot to create a new food like hot dogs, cakes, and packaged snack foods. These foods usually have more sugar, saturated fat, and salt. Eat these foods less often and in smaller amounts.



Instead of a highly-processed breakfast like sugar-sweetened breakfast cereal, try oatmeal with berries and plain yogurt.

More information:

- Canada's Food Guide: [Limit highly processed foods](#)

What is a plant-based diet?

If you follow a plant-based diet, it means you eat plant foods most often. Try to eat plant-based protein foods like beans, lentils, legumes, soy foods, nuts, and seeds instead of animal foods.



Eat animal foods like meat, dairy, and eggs, less often and in smaller amounts.

These tips can help you start to eat a plant-based diet.

- Eat a plant-based diet 1 to 2 days per week.
- Use half-meat and half plant-based protein in your recipes, like burgers made with ground beef and black beans.
- Replace animal foods with plant-based foods, like using chickpeas instead of eggs in sandwich filling.
- Try new recipes to learn how to use plant-based protein foods.

A plant-based diet can mean you eat more fibre and less saturated fat.

More information:

- Unlock Food: [What are the benefits of eating more plant-based foods](#)
- Canada's Food Guide: [Cooking with plant-based protein foods](#)

What liquids should I drink?

Unless your health-care team tells you otherwise, drink at least 9 cups (2.2 L) of liquid each day. This can keep you hydrated and help your body work well. You will need to drink more liquids if you exercise or it is hot outside.

Sugar sweetened drinks, like pop, sports drinks, or specialty coffee, are high in calories with little or no healthy nutrients.

Sugar-free and diet drinks, like diet pop, sugar-free Kool-Aid®, G0®, and sugar-free Vitamin Water® are low in calories but have little or no healthy nutrients.

Make water your drink of choice. If you do not like the taste, try adding sliced fruit, mint, or a splash of juice.

Other unsweetened drinks include:

- carbonated water, ice chips
- black or herbal tea
- coffee (black or with milk)
- broth, consommé



Alcohol raises the risk of some cancers, can make your cancer treatment less effective, and has other serious health effects. **It is better to not drink alcohol.**

Talk to your health-care team before you drink alcohol during treatment. If you choose to drink alcohol, follow [Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#) from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.

How can I practice mindful eating?

Being mindful can help you enjoy eating and create a positive relationship with food. Mindful eating means you:

- think about the food you eat
- take your time to eat
- notice when you are hungry and full.

Mindful eating can help you decide when you eat, what foods to eat, and how much you eat.

Take your time

- Make eating an important part of your life. Set aside time to plan, prepare, and eat meals and snacks.
- Slow down when you eat. Chew your food well. Give your body time to recognize when it is full.

Create a healthy eating environment

- Step away from your TV, desk, or activity and sit at a table. Put away computers, cell phones, and other electronics.
- Eat with family, friends, or coworkers and enjoy the conversation. Listen to relaxing music.
- Keep healthy food where you can see it, like the front of your cupboards or on your desk. You will be more likely to grab it.

Listen to your body

- Notice when you feel full. This takes practice. Think of “feeling full” as satisfied or not hungry anymore. This can mean you leave food on your plate or take more.
- Chew well so you can smell, taste, and feel the texture of the food.
- Ask yourself “why am I eating?” Are you hungry, bored, anxious, eating out of habit, or does the food just look good?
 - It is ok to eat for reasons other than hunger, like celebrating an important event. However, most often try to satisfy these feelings with enjoyable activities.
 - If you are bored or eating out of habit, try going for a walk, doing a puzzle, or reading a book or magazine.
 - If you have stress, anxiety, or sadness, try to call a friend or do a calming activity like meditation or deep breathing. **Let your health-care team know if strong feelings are affecting you.**
- Try not to skip meals or go a long time without eating. Give your body nourishing foods if it is hungry.

More information:

- Canada’s Food Guide: [Healthy eating habits](#)

How do I meal plan?

If you do not have enough time, feel tired, or are busy, it can be hard to eat well. Meal planning means you think about food ahead of time. Then it is easier to eat balanced meals.

1. Plan

- Plan 1 to 2 days of meals. After some time, you will be able to plan a whole week. Use a menu-planning tool, like on page 17.
- Eat the same food a few times in a week so you do not have to cook every day.
 - Eat the same breakfast every day this week. You can try something new next week.
 - Cook extra food at dinner. Set some of it aside for lunch the next day.
- Try 1 new recipe a week. This keeps eating interesting, but not overwhelming.
- Go through your pantry, fridge, and freezer. Make a **grocery list** of food you need to buy.

2. Purchase (buy food)

- Only buy food that is on your list. This will help you keep to your meal plan and budget.
- Buy healthy convenience foods like rotisserie chicken, bagged salads, and pre-cut or frozen fruits and vegetables to make cooking easier.

3. Prepare (get ready)

- Pick a day to make food. This makes cooking quicker the rest of the week. Chop vegetables, marinate protein foods, or assemble dishes so they are ready for the oven.
- Batch cook meals. Portion them into individual containers to keep in your fridge or freezer.

4. Pack

- Plan for meals away from home.
- Pack your lunch the night before so you are ready to go in the morning.
- Have healthy “grab-and-go” snacks like fruit sauce, low-fat yogurt cups, or hummus and whole-grain crackers. Buy fruits that are ready to eat like apples, bananas, and plums.
- If it is not possible to pack food, look up healthy food choices close to where you are.



More information:

- Canada’s Food Guide: [Food guide kitchen](#)
- Cookspiration: [My menu planner](#)
- Unlock Food: [Menu plan template](#)

Weekly meal plan

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Breakfast							
Lunch							
Dinner							

Is it ok to snack?

Yes. A snack can satisfy your hunger between meals, keep you feeling energized, and prevent overeating at your next meal. Be mindful. Snack when you are hungry, not out of habit.

The same way you would make a healthy meal, include vegetables or fruit, a protein food, and a whole-grain food in your snack. The protein and fibre in your snack will help you feel full for longer.

Pick healthy snacks:

- write down a list of snacks you will enjoy eating that include a vegetable or fruit, protein food, and whole grain food
- keep the ingredients you need to make these healthy snacks in your kitchen
- make foods ahead of time - cut up vegetables, boil eggs, or make a bean dip you plan to eat that week.



More information:

- Canada's Food Guide: [Healthy snacks](#)
- Cookspiration: [Snacks / Dips / Appetizers](#)

Is physical activity important?

Yes! Doing physical activity on a regular basis can help:

- give you energy and build muscle
- keep your bones, heart, and lungs healthy
- make your quality of life better and help you sleep
- make your mood and feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress better.



It is safe for most people with cancer to exercise. Talk to your doctor before you start a new exercise program.

If you are new to exercise:

- ✓ Start small. Do more as the exercise gets easier. Five minutes is better than no exercise!
- ✓ Choose exercise you enjoy. Try dancing, yoga, pickleball, swimming, or hiking.
- ✓ Include physical activity in your daily routine. Walking, housework, and climbing stairs all count.
- ✓ Do different types of exercise. Choose exercises that:
 - get your heart rate up, like walking or biking
 - build strength, like lifting weights or resistance bands
 - increase flexibility, like stretching or yoga.
- ✓ Build up to doing 150 minutes of exercise every week. This can look like 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week.

Exercise with others. This can give you the support you need to continue. These group exercise programs are **free** for people with cancer:

- Cancer Exercise: wellspring.ca
- Health, Exercise, Active Living and Therapeutic Lifestyle (HEALTH) Program: uhn.ca/torontorehab
- Active Match: activematch.ca
- Gilda's Club: gildasclubtoronto.org



More information:

- Canadian Cancer Society: [Being active](#)
- Wellspring: [Virtual centre: Self-paced learning videos](#)

Is a weight loss program right for me?

Weight is not the only marker of health. Even if your weight stays the same a balanced diet and physical activity can help you feel good, keep your body strong, and reduce your risk of nutrition-related chronic diseases!

If you need to lose weight for health reasons, you and your doctor may decide you should join a weight loss program.

Talk to your doctor about when the right time to lose weight is. For some people it is safe to lose weight during treatment. Others should wait until their cancer treatment finishes.



It is important to ask questions before you join a weight loss program so you know what to expect.

Weight loss programs should:

- ✓ encourage balanced eating
- ✓ be safe and effective over the long term
- ✓ teach you skills, like shopping for healthy groceries and meal planning, that you can use in your daily life
- ✓ give you information about the cost of the program upfront
- ✓ not pressure you to sign a long-term contract

Ask your doctor if you are eligible for a weight loss program covered by provincial health insurance (OHIP).

Choose a program you can follow long term. This gives you the best chance to meet your weight loss goal. Ask yourself, can I:

- follow this program or diet long term?
- enjoy these changes in lifestyle long term?
- be successful in this program?

Some programs promise quick results, but are hard to follow long term. Look out for these warning signs. A program:

- ✗ where you skip meals or do not eat major food categories, like carbohydrates or gluten
- ✗ that recommends a very low-calorie diet without medical supervision
- ✗ that makes you buy expensive supplements, food, or other products from their program

If a program sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

Healthy and lasting weight loss does not happen quickly. It is a promise to make healthy choices every day. Pick a program and surround yourself with people who will support you in your new healthy lifestyle.

More information:

- Ontario Bariatric Network: ontariobariatricnetwork.ca
- Unlock Food: [Checklist for choosing a weight loss program](#)

Where can I find more information?

When you search for information, make sure to look for trustworthy sources. The following websites offer reliable information based on scientific research.

- American Institute for Cancer Research: aicr.org
- World Cancer Research Fund: wcrf.org
- Canada's Food Guide: food-guide.canada.ca
- Dietitians of Canada: unlockfood.ca

Balanced eating takes practice. These websites teach cooking skills for people living with cancer and cancer survivors.

- Wellspring: [Nourish programs](#)
- ELLICSR: [The ELLICSR Kitchen](#)

Want to try something new? These websites have recipes that fit with a balanced eating approach.

- Canada's Food Guide: [Food Guide kitchen](#)
- Canadian Cancer Society: [Recipes](#)
- American Institute for Cancer Research: [Cancer prevention recipes](#)
- Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre: [Cooking with Karla](#) (low cost recipes)
- Dietitians of Canada: cookspiration.com
- Eat Right (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics): [Recipes](#)

Ready to make a change?

It can be hard when you try to change the way you eat! Take small steps to make change realistic.

- ✓ Take the time to outline what eating habit you want to change.
- ✓ Start with one new healthy eating habit at a time.
- ✓ Find small actions you can take to reach your goal.
- ✓ Use [SMART objective](#) (Canada's Food Guide) to help you reach your healthy eating goals.

Set small healthy eating goals to build your confidence. Over time, these small eating goals can add up to big changes in your lifestyle.

If you are a patient at the Odette Cancer Centre and you would like more nutrition information, please visit Patient & Family Support, TG 230 (T-wing, ground floor), call 416-480-4623 or visit [sunnybrook.ca/cancernutrition](https://www.sunnybrook.ca/cancernutrition)