

## Let's Talk About...

# Cancer treatment and nutrition

When your child is fighting cancer, good nutrition is an important part of their treatment. It can help your child:

- Build extra strength for healing.
- Prevent body tissue from breaking down.
- Fight off infection.
- Cope with higher doses of cancer treatment.

Learn more about finding nutritious foods for your child, helping your child eat when they don't feel well, and preparing food safely.

## How do I help my child eat well during cancer treatments?

It's important for your child to continue normal eating habits as much as possible even during cancer treatments. Follow these guidelines for developing a healthy diet:

- Make sure your child eats plenty of calories, especially from protein. If your child has lost weight or doesn't have as much appetite, try adding extra calories to food they enjoy. High-calorie and high-protein drinks may be helpful.
- Talk to a dietitian, who can help you come up with meal ideas and answer questions. They can help you get your child to eat more calories and protein as well. Visit [intermountainhealthcare.org/RD](http://intermountainhealthcare.org/RD) to find a dietician. [ChooseMyPlate.gov](http://ChooseMyPlate.gov) also has healthy recipes.
- Feed your child the right foods when they have side effects from cancer treatments. The next section has suggestions for helping your child feel better.
- Follow special food-handling guidelines. Because your child's immune system is weaker than usual, you must be extra careful about germs. Read the food-handling section for safe ways to store and prepare food.

## How can I help my child manage cancer treatment side effects?

When your child feels side effects from treatment, these ideas can help you find something they can eat:

### Appetite loss

- Feed your child the foods they like most. Have your child eat as much as they can when they are feeling well.
- Feed your child 6 small meals throughout the day, including a snack at bedtime, rather than 3 larger meals.



- Add butter, cheese, or other high-calorie ingredients to your child's food.
- Give your child high-calorie, high-protein supplements such as Carnation® Instant Breakfast® or Ensure®.
- Feed your child soft, cool, or frozen foods.
- Don't argue with or punish your child if they don't want to eat. Get them involved in shopping, cooking, or setting the table.

- Have your child take a walk before meals. Mild exercise can make your child hungry.
- Ask a dietitian about appetite stimulants. Your child can only use these if they are not eating enough. It may be better for your child to receive nutrition by tube or by IV.

### Changes in taste and smell

- Avoid foods with strong odors.
- Don't give up on foods. What tastes "off" today may taste normal next week.
- Add seasonings, flavorings, or sauces.
- Feed your child foods cold or at room temperature.
- Use plastic utensils and dishes.
- Add sugar to decrease the flavor of salty food or salt to make sugary food less sweet.
- Try frozen fruit, fresh vegetables, or marinated meats (red meats may be bitter).
- Have your child rinse their mouth and brush their teeth regularly.

### Dry mouth

- Have your child drink 8–12 cups of liquid daily.
- Add sauces, gravies, or salad dressings to foods.
- Stimulate saliva with sweet or tart foods and drinks, hard candy, or chewing gum. (Avoid this if your child has a sore mouth or throat.)
- Make sure your child takes small bites and chews well.
- Give your child soft, moist foods at room temperature. Use a blender or cook fruits and veggies to make them soft.
- Use a cool mist humidifier to moisten room air, especially at night. Keep the humidifier clean to avoid spreading bacteria or mold in the air.
- Keep your child's lips moist with lip balm.

### Sore mouth and throat

- Avoid citrus or spicy foods and liquids that irritate your child's mouth.
- Have your child drink through a straw.
- Serve your child soft or pureed foods.

- Serve food cold or at room temperature.
- Have your child rinse their mouth often with water.

### Vomiting

- Limit your child's eating or drinking until they stop vomiting.
- Start with small amounts of clear liquids, and add other foods slowly to see if your child tolerates them.
- If your child vomits, have them brush their teeth or rinse their mouth before trying more food.

### Nausea

- Feed your child bland foods like crackers, toast, and yogurt. Avoid fatty, very sweet, spicy, or strongly scented foods.
- Have your child eat slowly.
- Have your child rest, sitting up, 1 hour after meals.
- Have your child eat 6 small meals a day instead of 3 larger meals.
- Have your child drink liquid only between meals. They can slowly sip liquids all day so they don't get dehydrated.
- If smells are causing nausea, try covering drinks and having your child drink through a straw. They can also eat foods that don't require cooking.
- Have your child eat in a quiet room that isn't too warm.
- Ask your child's healthcare provider about nausea medicine.

### Diarrhea and cramping

- Have your child drink plenty of fluids to replace the ones they lose.
- Use fewer dairy products. If this helps, ask your child's dietitian for more lactose-free ideas.
- Serve your child foods with pectin, such as applesauce, oatmeal, and peeled fruits and vegetables.
- Serve your child foods high in potassium and sodium, such as bananas, juice, fresh fruits and vegetables, and potatoes.
- Have your child avoid chewing gum and caffeinated drinks like coffee and soda.

## Weight and muscle loss

- “Power pack” your child’s food by adding butter, cheese, whole milk, or other high-calorie ingredients.
- Give your child protein drinks like Carnation® Instant Breakfast®, Pediasure®, or Nutren® Jr.
- Have your child drink more liquids.
- Have your child eat more fiber.

## Constipation

- Have your child drink more liquids, including warm drinks (make sure they are not too hot).
- Feed your child more fiber.

## Steroid-induced hunger

- Limit foods to scheduled meals.
- Offer water more than juice or soda.



## What happens if my child needs a feeding tube?

Even if you offer high-calorie and high-protein foods, your child may have trouble eating enough. They may need tube feedings to get enough nutrition. These feedings can give your child all the calories, protein, vitamins, and fluids they need. If your child needs a feeding tube, they can still try to eat by mouth. For example, your child may receive tube feedings at night while they sleep so they can eat during the day.

## How do I safely shop for and prepare food for my child?

While your child receives cancer treatment, their immune system is weak. The immune system helps the body fight infection and stay healthy. These guidelines can keep your child safe from germs that could make them sick.

- Get cold foods home from the store and into the freezer quickly.
- Don’t buy foods with expired “use-by” labels, dented cans, or containers with cracked lids.
- Avoid buying deli food, which can have bacteria.
- Keep cold foods cold and cook hot food thoroughly. If you’re not eating right away, refrigerate food immediately.
- Don’t leave foods at room temperature longer than 1 hour, especially dairy products, cooked rice and beans, cooked or sliced vegetables, and cut fruit.
- Don’t serve foods with raw or unpasteurized ingredients.
- Don’t use eggs that have cracked before you could use them. Never serve any foods that look or smell strange.
- Don’t refreeze foods you’ve defrosted.
- Avoid using a wooden cutting board, which can harbor bacteria, and don’t cut cooked foods on the same surface as raw foods.
- Always prepare food in a clean area. Wash the tops of cans before opening them.

## How do I safely store food and clean up after meals?

To protect your child from germs during their cancer treatments:

- Store foods in tightly sealed, covered containers. Freeze foods in freezer bags or clear airtight containers.
- Throw out refrigerated leftovers after 3 days, and throw out foods with freezer burn.
- If you buy food in large bags, divide it into serving sizes and seal it in new food storage bags. Rotate stored food to use the oldest food first.

