

Eating During Chemotherapy: What to Expect

Chemotherapy often affects eating in waves that follow your treatment cycle — some days feel fine, others harder. Eating well on good days, keeping easy foods on hand for tough ones, managing nausea and taste changes, and staying hydrated all help. Tell your team about eating problems, since much can be eased.

This page is for anyone starting or going through chemotherapy, and for the people who cook for them. It explains why eating changes, how to plan around your cycle, and when to call for help.

How chemo affects eating

Chemotherapy works throughout the body. It affects fast-growing cells, including those lining the digestive tract and the mouth. That can bring nausea, taste and smell changes, mouth or throat soreness, a low appetite, and changes in bowel habits. Chemo is usually given in cycles, so these effects often come and go. You may feel worse in the days right after a treatment and better later in the cycle. Knowing that pattern helps you plan.

Working with the cycle

Eat well when you feel able, and be gentle with yourself when you do not. On good days, aim for nourishing, protein-rich meals. You might cook a little extra to freeze. For harder days, keep simple foods on hand — crackers, soups, yogurt, smoothies, nutrition drinks — so eating takes little effort. NCI suggests small meals every 2 to 3 hours, about 5 or 6 a day. That is usually easier than forcing down three big ones.

Handling common problems

For nausea, try cool foods with little smell, bland options, and eating slowly. Use any anti-nausea medicine your team has given you, as they directed. For taste changes, tart or seasoned foods and plastic utensils can help, and so can simply trying things you would not normally pick. Chemo can leave a metallic taste in the mouth. For a sore mouth, soft, moist, mild foods are gentler. Sip fluids through the day. None of this has to be perfect.

Chemo can also lower your white blood cells, which makes infection easier to catch. Food safety matters more than usual. Wash your hands and any fruit and vegetables, cook meat and eggs thoroughly, and choose pasteurized juice, egg and milk products. NCI also says to skip moldy cheeses such as blue cheese while your counts are low.

Telling your team

Let your team know about nausea, weight loss, or trouble eating. These are common and often very treatable. They would rather adjust your care than have you struggle. Ask about anti-nausea options and a referral to an oncology dietitian. NCI says to speak with your team right away if you start losing weight, and to report a loss of more than 3 to 5 pounds in a week. This is general information, not advice for you. Your care team, and a dietitian if one is available, can fit it to your treatment.

When to get help sooner

- **Call your care team immediately, day or night, if** you have a temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, or chills and shaking, at any point during chemotherapy. CDC calls a fever during chemo a medical emergency, because your infection-fighting cells may be low and fever can be the only clue. Do not wait for a call back, and do not take a fever medicine first — it can hide the problem. Cannot get through fast? Go to an emergency department and say you are having chemotherapy.
- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department if** you are vomiting blood or something that looks like coffee grounds, if you pass black or bloody stools, or if you are too weak, confused, or drowsy to drink. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call your care team right away if** you cannot keep fluids down, if you have not passed urine in 8 hours or it is very dark, if you have had diarrhea for more than 24 hours, or if your mouth or throat hurts too much to eat, drink, or sleep.
- **Call your care team within a day or two if** nausea keeps you from eating, if constipation does not settle, or if you are losing weight without trying.

Sources

- [National Cancer Institute — Eating Hints: Before, during, and after Cancer Treatment](https://www.cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/eating-hints) (cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/eating-hints)
- [National Cancer Institute — Weight Changes, Malnutrition, and Cancer](https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/appetite-loss) (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/appetite-loss)
- [National Cancer Institute — Mouth and Throat Problems and Cancer Treatment](https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/mouth-throat) (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/mouth-throat)
- [CDC — Fever and Cancer Treatment](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html) (cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html)

Source: National Cancer Institute — Eating Hints (cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/eating-hints)

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