

Preventing weight loss — Why is it important for people with cancer?

Nutrition is the food and drink you need for your health and wellbeing. Good nutrition is important for people who have cancer.

Food is your body's fuel. What you eat and drink gives you energy, protein, vitamins and minerals. These are all needed to make sure your body works well. If you do not give your body enough fuel (food and drink) this can cause weight loss. If this happens you are at risk of malnutrition.

Malnutrition is common in people with cancer, but is not always a side effect of cancer. Malnutrition should be prevented at all stages of the cancer journey as it can cause problems such as:



Side effects from treatment, the chance of infection, time spent in hospital



Muscle strength, how well treatment works, how well your immune system works, wound healing

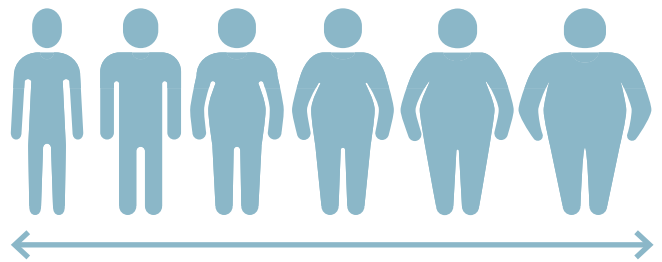


Did you know that **1 out of every 4** people with cancer are malnourished?



Malnutrition can happen at any weight, shape or size

It is important to understand malnutrition can happen to anyone. It does not matter what size or shape you are or if you are overweight or underweight. You can still lose muscle, which can make you feel weak and not able to do your everyday tasks.



Why are people with cancer at risk of malnutrition?

Many factors can increase the risk of malnutrition, including:

- Cancer and treatment for cancer can:
 - » Cause your body to use more energy and protein (fuel).
 - » Make it more difficult to eat.
- Feeling unwell.
- Stress, worry and feeling tired.

Could you have malnutrition?

Sometimes it is hard to tell if you have malnutrition. Some signs include;

- You have lost weight without trying. You need to tighten your belt. Your clothes feel loose.
- You are eating less than usual.

What can you do to prevent or manage malnutrition?

Protein foods are important to prevent and manage malnutrition. Protein foods help your body to build and repair muscle during treatment and recovery. Eat the protein part of your meal first, and try to snack on protein foods between meals.

High protein foods include:



Meat (beef, lamb, pork, goat, kangaroo, veal)



Poultry (chicken, turkey, duck)



Fish and seafood (fish, prawns, crab)



Eggs



Dairy (full cream milk, cheese, yoghurt, custard, ice cream, milkshakes, smoothies, and soy based products)

Note: *Nut, oat and rice milks are generally lower in protein.*



Nuts and seeds (whole nuts/ seeds, peanut butter)



Beans (lentils, kidney beans, baked beans, chick peas)



Tofu

Have you lost weight without trying?

If your weight has reduced you might need more **energy** to fuel your body. Add **high energy foods** to your meals and snacks, such as;

- Full cream dairy products including butter and cream.
- Fats and oils including vegetable oil, margarine, mayonnaise, avocado, peanut butter.

What else can you do to prevent or manage malnutrition?

- Eat small meals and snacks every few hours.
- Eat more when you feel most hungry.
- Take note of how much you eat and drink, and of any change to your weight.
- Stay active to help build and repair your muscles.
- If you are taking any nutrition, vitamin or herbal supplements, tell your doctor or nurse. This is important because they can affect how your medications and treatments work.

What is a dietitian?

A dietitian is a specialist in food and nutrition. Every person has different nutrition needs and a dietitian can help you to meet your own nutrition needs to prevent and manage malnutrition.

If you think you might have malnutrition, you should see a Dietitian.

How can you find a dietitian?

- **If you are currently having treatment for cancer**, you can ask your doctor or nurse to refer you to a dietitian in your hospital, or health service.
- **If you are *not* currently having treatment**, you can find a dietitian at your local health service, or in your community. You could also ask your doctor to refer you.

Where to get more information

- Call Cancer Council **13 11 20** to speak to a cancer nurse. You can also email askanurse@cancersa.org.au.

Visit cancersa.org.au for more information on nutrition and cancer or to download resources.

www.cancersa.org.au/nutrition

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This information is based on recent research on malnutrition and cancer (at the time of publication) and has been developed with help from a range of health professionals and people affected by cancer. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical advice.