

Healthy eating

There is more information on bladder cancer and its treatment on our website at actionbladdercanceruk.org

Making a positive change

Eating healthily, exercising regularly, drinking less alcohol and not smoking are the essentials of a healthy lifestyle. If you have been diagnosed with bladder cancer, now is a good time to think about whether you can make some changes. Improving your fitness and general health before you have treatment and/or surgery is likely to help you recover better from the effects. It can also give you a positive focus. Carrying on with these positive changes to your diet and fitness after your treatment can also help to keep you more healthy in the longer term.

Having cancer or treatment can affect how much you can eat or drink or whether you feel like eating. One of the unwanted effects of chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery is that they can make it more difficult to eat normally and absorb nutrients from food.



A note of caution

You may need specialist advice if you aren't able to eat very much or are losing a lot of weight. Speak to your medical team if this is the case. Also tell your medical team if any of the effects described here are severe – you may need specialist support from a dietitian.

Also, if you have been advised to follow a special diet for another medical condition, such as diabetes, kidney disease or heart disease, some of the advice here won't apply to you.



Eating and drinking well can help you feel better, though. You'll feel less tired and have more energy than you would do otherwise. In general, the advice for healthy eating with cancer, before and during treatment and afterwards is the same as for people without cancer (see below). But if you're struggling to eat anything, don't worry too much – eating a little of what you fancy is much better than not eating anything.

Healthy eating advice for everyone Eat plenty of fruit, vegetables, wholegrain foods and pulses, lean meat (such as chicken), fish and lower-fat dairy products. Cut down or cut out foods high in sugar, salt and fat, such as biscuits, crisps, fizzy soft drinks. Reduce or cut out processed meat, such as ham and bacon, and alcohol. Public Health England capture this in its Eatwell Guide, shown overleaf.

If you're losing weight It's common to lose weight when you have cancer. The cancer itself can use up the body's energy. Cancer and some treatments make it harder for the body to take what it needs from food and drink. And you may lose interest in food, or find the thought of eating makes you nauseous.

Eatwell Guide

Use the Eatwell Guide to help you get a balance of healthier and more sustainable food. It shows how much of what you eat overall should come from each food group.

Check the label on packaged foods

Each serving (150g) contains

Energy	Fat	Saturated	Sugars	Salt
1046kJ 250kcal	3.0g	1.3g	34g	0.9g
	LOW	LOW	HIGH	MED
13%	4%	7%	38%	15%

of an adult's reference intake

Typical values (as sold) per 100g: 697kJ/ 167kcal

Choose foods lower in fat, salt and sugars

Eat at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day

Eat more beans and pulses, 2 portions of sustainably sourced fish per week, one of which is oily. Eat less red and processed meat

Eat less often and in small amounts



Choose wholegrain or higher fibre versions with less added fat, salt and sugar

Water, lower fat milk, sugar-free drinks including tea and coffee all count.
Limit fruit juice and/or smoothies to a total of 150ml a day.



Choose unsaturated oils and use in small amounts



Dairy and alternatives
Choose lower fat and lower sugar options



Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates

Per day 2000kcal 2500kcal = ALL FOOD + ALL DRINKS

If this is the case, make every mouthful of food count. Eat high-energy foods. And aim to include some high-protein foods (see www.bbcgoodfood.com/howto/guide/best-sources-protein for some examples). Your body may need extra protein to build up some muscle again.

If you don't feel like eating, there are some simple ways to help yourself (see Box ②).

Tips to help with eating and drinking

- Aim to eat smaller meals or snacks, but more often (five or six a day)
- Try to sit in an upright position while you're eating
- Make mealtimes relaxing – chew and swallow slowly
- Try not to have a drink with a meal – leave it till later and concentrate on the food
- Make your food look nice – add a garnish and arrange it nicely on your plate
- Strongly flavoured food and drink can sometimes make you feel more like eating – black coffee, a spicy snack, tonic water or similar
- Soups, protein drinks, smoothies and even a glass of milk between meals are good ways to top up your diet
- Try to stay hydrated during the day – avoid too many caffeine based drinks and drink more water, juice, cordials etc.
- Have high-energy snacks in the house – cereal bars, avocado pears, seeds, nuts, for example
- Plan a bedtime snack
- Don't be hard on yourself – if you really don't want to eat, go for a walk and try again later



What to eat

Fruit and vegetables We know that fruit and vegetables are a mainstay of a healthy diet, and it's important to include them in your diet. If you're losing weight, though, or you've lost your appetite, include some of the higher-energy ones in your diet, such as bananas, dried fruit, avocados, sweet potatoes, squashes, peas and sweetcorn.

Oils and fats Adding fats, oils and healthy fat-rich foods is a good way to boost the energy in a meal. A spoonful of olive oil can be added to soups and smoothies, for example. You can also cook food in olive, rapeseed (vegetable) or sunflower oils rather than grilling or baking, as this will add calories. Peanut butter is a love it or hate it food. If you like it, try it on crackers or in smoothies. Oily fish, such as mackerel, tuna, herring and salmon, are very healthy options, too.

Meat If you're a meat eater, try not to have too much red meat, such as beef, pork and lamb. While red meat has high nutrient and protein levels, eating too much is linked with developing and returning cancer. For the same reason, it's best to cut out processed meats, such as salami, ham and bacon.

Vegetarian and vegan Lentils and beans are high in protein. Tofu is nutritious and high in protein, so it's a great base for a meal.

Boosting milk

You can give an extra protein and energy boost to the milk you use in drinks and cooking.

- Add 2–4 tablespoons of skimmed milk powder to a pint (570ml) of whole milk
- Keep it in the fridge for up to 2 days and use as normal



Reducing unwanted effects

Nausea can mean you don't feel like eating even when you know you should. As well as the advice in the previous section, bring food and drinks to room temperature before you eat them.

Bloating and wind can be a problem. Eating smaller meals can help, as can cooking fruit and vegetables, rather than eating them raw. If you feel bloated, try sipping a warm drink, such as tea or warm water with lemon. Avoid eating spicy or greasy foods. And also avoid foods that are very high in fibre, such as bran-based breakfast cereals. If you like fizzy drinks, let them go a bit flat before you drink them.

If you feel you're passing more wind than normal (and normal is 15–25 times a day), try cutting out beans, cabbage, brussels sprouts, sweetcorn, cauliflower, onions, pickles, fizzy drinks, foods and drinks containing artificial sweeteners, such as mannitol, sorbitol and xylitol.

Drinking peppermint water or tea may help, as might fennel tea or baby's gripe water.

Diarrhoea can be an unwanted effect of treatment. You'll need to make sure you replace fluids that are being lost, so have plenty of drinks (hot and cold). Drink 10–14 glasses a day (2 litres or 3.5 pints).

If diarrhoea is a problem at night, try having your last meal earlier.

There's no evidence that sticking to a low-fibre diet is helpful for diarrhoea caused by cancer treatment, so try to continue to eat healthily.

Some foods and drink can make diarrhoea worse. Try cutting down on fried foods, caffeine (as in tea, coffee and cola drinks), spicy foods, alcohol, nuts and seeds.

Constipation can be another problem caused by treatment. Make sure you drink enough (see above). If you can manage to increase the fibre in your diet, this might help, too. Walking or some other gentle exercise might also help get things moving.

Change in taste or smell You might be affected by this on chemotherapy or after a cystectomy. Some people notice a metallic taste. Switching to plastic utensils or wooden chopsticks might help.

Or try eating food with a sharp flavour, such as lemon. Some people find that making flavours more extreme, by sweetening foods or marinating ingredients before cooking, is beneficial.

Dry mouth If treatment is leaving you with a dry mouth, try sipping water throughout the day or sucking on small pieces of ice. Sucking a sweet can also help. Sharp flavours, such as lemon, may also relieve the feeling.

When you're feeling better

Once the unwanted effects have passed and you feel you have more energy and appetite, try to keep to a healthy diet and maintain it as part of your lifestyle. There's some research to suggest that after treatment for bladder cancer, people tend to forget about a healthy diet – particularly when it comes to eating wholegrains, reducing salt and eating plenty of fruit and vegetables. It's just as important – and possibly more so – for people with bladder cancer to have a healthy diet, and by choosing to eat in this way, you're making a positive choice about your health.

More information



As well as information about bladder cancer and treatments, our website has other information sheets that you might find helpful, including sheets about other aspects of healthy living.

Other charities have information on healthy eating and how to cope with unwanted treatment effects that may be helpful, too.

- The World Cancer Research Fund has more information and some recipes at www.wcrf-uk.org/sites/default/files/EatingWellDuringCancer_Web.pdf
- Cancer Research UK at www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/diet-and-cancer/how-to-enjoy-a-healthy-diet
- Macmillan Cancer Support at www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/maintaining-a-healthy-lifestyle