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How to Manage

# Loss of Appetite



## This patient guide will help you understand:

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This guide is for people who have loss of appetite before, during or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients, family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.

# What is cancer-related loss of appetite?

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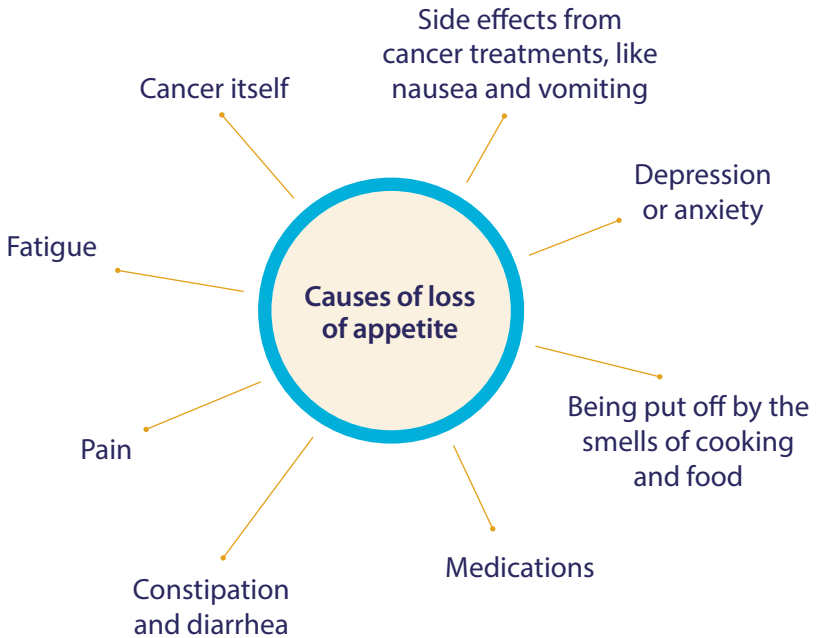
Loss of appetite is when you do not have feelings of hunger or interest in food. If you are not able to eat you may lose weight and not be strong enough for your treatments.



# What causes cancer-related loss of appetite?

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This picture shows things that can make you not want to eat:



# What can I do when I do not feel like eating?

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## Ask for a referral to a registered dietitian

A dietitian can help you make a plan to eat and drink when you have no appetite.

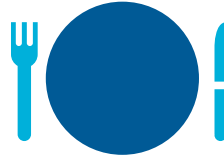
### **Treat symptoms that might be affecting your appetite**

If pain, nausea or any other symptoms are making you not want to eat, talk to your health care team. Many symptoms can be treated, which may help to bring your appetite back.

You can also visit **unlockfood.ca** or call **1-866-797-0000** to connect with a registered dietitian for free.

## Make every bite count!

You need to get enough calories, protein and liquids in your diet to keep up your strength and keep going with your treatments.



### Eat and drink often

Eat small meals more often instead of 2 or 3 big ones.

Try to have a few mouthfuls of food every 1-2 hours even if you do not feel hungry.

Have easy to eat, nutritious snacks with you like, cheese & crackers, pudding cups, hummus & veggies, and yogurt.

### Choose higher calorie foods

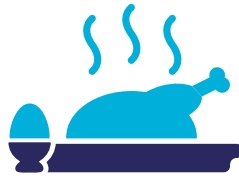
These simple changes give you more calories without eating more food.

#### Here are some examples:

Switch from	To
Skim milk	2% or whole milk
Tea or coffee	Hot chocolate made with whole milk
Broth soup	Cream soup made with milk
Water	Juice (or diluted juice)
Low-fat dairy	Full-fat dairy (sour cream, yogurt, cottage cheese)
Frozen yogurt or sorbet	Ice-cream
Oatmeal	Granola (soaked in whole milk or full-fat yogurt)

## Choose food and drinks that are high in protein

Protein helps your body heal when you are going through cancer treatments.



### These foods are high in protein:

Dairy products like milk, Greek yogurt, pudding and cheese

Meat, poultry, fish, seafood

Tofu, soy beverages, nuts, seeds, peanut butter

Dried peas, beans and lentils

Eggs

### Make high protein milk.

Add 1 cup of skim milk powder to 4 cups of whole milk. Use the high-protein milk in cream soups, stews, gravies and sauces.

### Add protein powder to liquid foods or baking.

The amount of protein in each brand of powder may be different so read the label or ask your dietitian to help you.

## Add more fat to your food

Here are some simple ways to make your foods more calorie rich.



Add:	To:
Olive oil, butter or margarine	Noodles, rice and breads
Gravy or sauces	Mashed potatoes and meats
Cream, honey, maple syrup or jams	Fruits, yogurts and desserts
Mayonnaise	Salad dressings, sandwiches, tuna and egg salad
Whipping cream	Soups, custards, fresh fruit, smoothies or pasta sauces
Avocado	Sandwiches, quesadillas or mash it and use as a dip or spread
Nuts and nut butters	Toast, smoothies, snacks
Full fat cheese	Sandwiches, melted on vegetables, in sauces or as a snack
Sour cream	Potatoes, dips

## Drink at least 6-8 cups of liquids each day

Use these tips to help you get enough liquids:



Drink often throughout the day. Choose liquids with calories like juice, milk, soup and fruit smoothies.

Keep a water bottle with you, filled with your favourite drink.

Limit drinks with caffeine (cola, coffee, tea) and alcohol.

### If you need to get more calories, try these high calorie drinks:

Carnation Breakfast Essentials

Yogurt drinks

Commercial nutrition supplements (like Boost Plus, Ensure Plus or ask at your local health food or grocery store)

Ovaltine or other malted drinks

Whole or chocolate milk

Milkshakes or homemade smoothies

#### Tip:

Ask your health care team if you can take your medication with milkshakes or other high-calorie drinks.



## Eat whatever foods appeal to you

Eat whatever tastes good to you, whenever you feel up to it. Do not worry about sticking to your usual schedule for meals.

Eat your biggest meal of the day when you feel your best. If you feel best in the morning, eat more then.

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Eat breakfast foods for dinner or dinner foods for breakfast.

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Eat your favorite foods at any time of the day.

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Use smaller plates or bowls.

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## Eat convenience foods if you have trouble preparing meals

Try these tips to make preparing meals easier:

Contact your local community meal service program (like Meals on Wheels).

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Buy frozen foods that are easy to put in the oven. Try mini-quiche, pot-pies, chicken fingers, frozen pastas and any other foods that appeal to you.

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Buy pre-cut vegetables, fruits, cheese and other quick snacks.

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Use the deli counter at your local grocery store for pre-prepared meats, salads and other foods.

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## Be active and exercise

Exercise can help to boost your appetite when you do not feel like eating. Even small amounts of exercise can help. Try to get up and do something every day.



Choose an activity you like.

Go at your own pace.

Start slowly with something like gentle stretching and a short walk.

### Be safe!

- ✓ Talk to your health care team if you have questions about how to exercise safely.
- ✓ You can exercise at any time during or after treatment.
- ✓ Stop and rest if you feel sore, stiff or out of breath.

## Get help from family and friends

Family and friends may be upset by how little you want to eat. Share this list with them so they know how to help you in the best way.



You should not be forced to eat. Family and friends should encourage you to eat what you want, when you want to eat it. This is not the time to judge or try to change your loved one's choice of foods.

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Tell family and friends that talking too much about your appetite can make you feel worse.

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Accept help from family and friends who offer to cook and shop for you – they may be looking for ways to help. Tell them which foods you like and are able to eat.

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Invite people over so you can eat together. This might help you eat more.

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## Medications might help your appetite



Even after improving all the things that can be treated, you may still not have much of an appetite.

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Sometimes appetite stimulation medications might help. Speak with your doctor and health care team for more information.

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# When should I talk to my health care team?

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## Tell your health care team right away if you:

Have nausea and/or vomiting that does not get better

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Cannot eat for a day or more

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Have pain when eating

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Cannot pee for an entire day

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Have not had a bowel movement (gone poo) for more than 2 days

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## What is symptom screening?

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

## You may need help with your loss of appetite if:

You do not feel hungry, even if you have not eaten in several hours or even days.

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You are losing weight and notice a loss of muscle and strength.

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Your loss of appetite is causing you worry or stress.

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You need help making a plan to eat more.

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# Where can I get more information?

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For links to these and other helpful resources go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites:

### **Cancer Care Ontario**

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

### **Canadian Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

1-888-939-3333

### **Nourish**

[www.nourishonline.ca](http://www.nourishonline.ca)

### **EatRight Ontario**

[www.eatrightontario.ca](http://www.eatrightontario.ca)

1-877-510-5102

## Support services:

### **Canadian Cancer Society Peer Support Service**

[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

### **Cancer Chat Canada**

[www.cancerchatcanada.ca](http://www.cancerchatcanada.ca)

## Books:

### **Goes Down Easy:**

**Recipes to help you cope with the challenge of eating during cancer treatment —**

Elise Mecklinger, 2006

### **The Essential Cancer Treatment Nutrition Guide & Cookbook —**

Jean LaMantia and Neil Berinstein, 2012

### **Eating well when you have cancer**

[www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)

## **Ask your health care team for more information about loss of appetite.**

Pamphlets:

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Books:

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Videos:

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Classes:

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Local support groups:

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The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Food ideas to help with decreased appetite, Healthy eating using high energy, high protein foods (BC Cancer Agency)
- Appetite (Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre)
- What to eat when you don't feel like eating (University Health Network)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about loss of appetite. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing loss of appetite. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

### **Need this information in an accessible format?**

1-855-460-2647 | TTY 416-217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient guides please go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

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