

Tips to Regain Weight for Cancer Survivors



This fact sheet is one in a series developed for cancer survivors who have finished active treatment. Eating well and maintaining a healthy weight may help lower the chances of some cancers returning and improve overall health.

It is not uncommon to lose weight before being diagnosed with cancer or during cancer treatment. Weight loss may be due to the impact cancer has on your body or the side effects of treatment. Some people can manage the weight loss if they were carrying an excess of weight before cancer. Other people need to regain the weight they have lost.

How can I increase my weight?

If your appetite has returned it probably won't be too hard to put weight back on by eating nutritiously and regularly. However, many people find it takes them a while to regain the appetite they had before they were diagnosed, particularly if they had a cancer that affected their digestive organs, such as pancreatic or stomach cancer.

There are ways to take in more energy and protein to aid weight gain without having to eat more food or unhealthy food. The tips below may be useful, especially if you don't feel like eating much.

Should I eat fatty or sugary food?

During treatment it's recommended that you try to avoid losing too much weight – even if that means eating high-fat foods and not eating healthily all of the time.

However, after treatment, it's important to try to regain weight while still eating healthily. High-fat and high-sugar foods should only be eaten occasionally as a treat.

What about exercise?

It's important to stay active and to do some gentle or moderate exercise most days of the week – depending on what you are used to. This is because exercise increases fitness, tones muscles, elevates mood and improves well-being.

However, you should not overdo your exercise, particularly if you are not getting enough kilojoules (energy). Too much exercise can cause you to burn off too many kilojoules, making it difficult to regain weight. Listen to your body – if you are fatigued or sore after exercise, you are probably doing too much.

tips

- Try to have a small snack and/or nourishing drink every 2 hours if your appetite is poor or you can't manage large quantities.
- If you aren't interested in food or regularly skip eating, try using a timetable to plan meals and snacks.
- Add barley, peas, beans and lentils to soups, stews or casseroles.
- Add skim milk powder to your milk, and use it when making desserts, sauces, soup, mashed vegetables and egg dishes.
- Melt margarine or drizzle olive, grapeseed or canola oil over vegetables, rice or pasta.
- Nutritional supplement drinks such as Ensure, Sustagen or Resource can provide extra energy, protein, vitamins and minerals if you aren't eating well. These drinks can boost a small meal or snack, or replace solid food.
- Spread bread thickly with margarine.
- Talk to your dietitian or doctor about using nutritional supplement drinks or other products to help you gain weight.



Tips to Regain Weight

Some ideas for light meals

- Bowl of muesli or porridge made with high-protein milk
- Baked beans on toast with grated cheese on top
- Crumpet or raisin bread or muffin with margarine and fruit spread
- Sandwich and a glass of high-protein milk
- Scrambled egg (made with high-protein milk) on toast, and a glass of orange juice
- Tuna or sardines on toast with tomato
- Yoghurt and fruit
- Vegetable soup

Snack ideas

- Banana
- Handful of dried fruit and nuts
- Creamed rice
- Fruit cake
- Two plain biscuits, such as arrowroot or granita
- Anzac biscuits
- Strawberry smoothie

Vegetable soup

- 1 tbsp margarine
- 3 cups diced veg (eg. potato, onion, carrot)
- 2 tbsp plain flour
- 3 cups water
- 2 chicken (or veg) stock cubes
- 300g can butter beans
- 1 cup milk
- 3 tbsp tomato paste
- ½ cup rice

Melt margarine and sauté vegetables for 5 minutes. Add flour and stir through. Add crumbled stock cubes, water, tomato paste and butter beans. Simmer until the vegetables are tender.

Blend mixture in a blender or food processor until smooth. Stir in milk. Add the rice and heat gently for 15–20 mins until rice is cooked.

High-protein milk

- 600 mL milk
- 9 tbsp (¾ cup) skim milk powder

Sprinkle powder into milk and whisk until dissolved. Stir before drinking or adding to cooking.

If you have lactose intolerance, try using low-lactose or soy milk whisked with soy milk powder.

Strawberry smoothie

- ½ cup strawberries (or other fruit)
- ½ cup high-protein milk
- 3–5 drops vanilla essence
- 1 pinch cinnamon

Blend fruit thoroughly. Add all other ingredients to fruit and blend again. Serve chilled

This fact sheet provides general information only and is not a substitute for individual health advice. You should talk to your doctor or dietitian about your specific situation.

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