

Lung Cancer *Frequently Asked Questions*

Is it safe to take vitamin or herbal supplements during chemotherapy or radiation therapy?

Since research is not yet final in this area, it is recommended that you avoid extra antioxidant vitamin supplements (such as Vitamins C, E and A) during your treatment. Herbal supplements should also be avoided since they often contain high levels of antioxidants and can interact with cancer treatment. A standard multivitamin that provides 100 percent of the recommended daily value (% DV on labels) for vitamins and minerals is okay.

There are several studies showing that vitamin supplements can interfere with the effectiveness of the radiation or chemotherapy treatments. The theory is that since antioxidants protect the body's cells from damage, taking excess amounts may actually protect the cancerous cells from the chemotherapy or radiation treatment. This will decrease the effectiveness of the treatment. On the other hand, there have also been studies showing benefit from combining antioxidants and chemotherapy. Because there is not enough research in this area, it is still recommended that you avoid extra supplements.

What side effects might I experience from lung cancer treatment and how will they affect my eating?

Side effects will vary according to the type of treatment you receive and the duration of the treatment. For instance, if you receive radiation treatment to your chest/lung area, you may develop pain in your esophagus that makes it difficult to eat regular foods. You may have to switch to a soft diet with high calorie liquids (i.e., milkshakes, Ensure®, Boost®) to meet your nutrition needs. If you receive chemotherapy, you may experience one or more of the following side effects: nausea, loss of appetite, change in the way foods taste, diarrhea, constipation and fatigue. What to eat or not eat to help manage these side effects is reviewed in the “Nutrition During Cancer Treatment”.

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Is it okay if I lose weight during my cancer treatment?

Losing weight during treatment is not encouraged, even if you are overweight. If you lose weight during treatment, it means you are not getting enough calories. When you don't get enough calories, you are also not getting enough protein, vitamins, and minerals. This will affect your strength and ability to tolerate treatment. It may also affect your response to treatment and slow your recovery. Cancer treatment can often increase your nutritional needs. During your treatment, it is important to maintain your weight with adequate nutrition intake. Consult with a dietitian to assess your nutrition needs during your treatment and to provide eating advice.

My appetite is not good and I keep losing weight. What can I do about this?

Poor appetite and weight loss are common before, during, and after lung cancer treatment. The main nutrition goal is to maintain your weight as much as possible. If you aren't taking in sufficient calories and protein, you will lose weight and muscle mass, weakening your body and lessening your ability to tolerate treatment. However, lung cancer and its treatment can affect your taste for foods, lessen your desire to eat, and possibly make you nauseated and tired. All of these things make it difficult to get sufficient calories and protein to maintain good nutrition. Ask to speak with a dietitian to review your calorie and protein needs and construct a plan with you.

Also, if your appetite is poor for long periods of time and is not caused by nausea, you and your doctor may want to discuss the use of appetite stimulants to improve your intake and assist you with maintaining your weight. Common appetite stimulants used for cancer-related loss of appetite are Megace® and Marinol®. If your appetite is poor most of the time and you are losing weight, ask your doctor if an appetite stimulant medication is appropriate for you.

Is there a special diet that I should follow during chemotherapy or radiation?

During cancer treatment, the best diet is one that is healthy and provides adequate nourishment. Make sure you get enough of the following:

Protein (about 1/2 gm per pound of body weight) from lean protein foods such as fish, chicken, low fat dairy foods and legumes

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"Healthy" fats such as the monounsaturated and omega 3 fatty acids

- Whole grain foods
- Lots of fruits and vegetables
- Plenty of water and or other decaffeinated fluids

Sometimes the side effects of treatment may make it hard to follow a "perfect" diet all the time. If your appetite has decreased or you have nausea, it is important to eat the foods that work for you. Refer to the "Nutrition During Cancer Treatment" section for more information on coping with the side effects of treatment. Also, ask to speak with one of our dietitians. They will assess your diet and advise you on ways to improve your nutrition. They can also make suggestions on foods to eat when you are not feeling well.

Is it true that sugar "feeds" cancer and because of that, I should avoid all sugar in my diet?

Recent studies suggest that a diet high in simple sugar (such as refined sugar, sodas and sweets) may increase the risk of developing cancer. While this association has been noted, we are still not sure of the cause. It may be that a diet high in simple sugar has less cancer fighting nutrients. It may be that simple sugar causes a surge in insulin that increases the growth of cancer cells.

Despite the lack of research, a number of books and web sites prematurely advise people with cancer to eliminate sugar as part of a cancer prevention diet. However, it would be unhealthy to avoid all food sources of simple sugars since this would include fruits, vegetables and grains. These foods are the prime source of nutrients that have been shown to reduce cancer risk.

The way to prevent surges in insulin is by reducing your intake of foods that are very high in simple sugar. This can be done by avoiding foods such as sweets and sodas, or by combining simple sugars with foods that have fiber, protein and fat. Combining simple sugars with these foods will slow their absorption and avoid a surge in insulin. Based on research the American Cancer Society issues, the following recommendations to reduce cancer risk:

Eat five or more servings of a variety of vegetables and fruits each day.

Eat other foods from plant sources several times each day (whole grains, beans, nuts, etc).

Limit the amount of refined carbohydrates (simple sugar) including pastries, sweetened cereals, soft drinks, and sugar you eat.

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Do I need to buy all organic fruits and vegetables to protect myself against pesticides?

No. Overall, research shows that the health benefits of eating produce far outweigh the risk of pesticide exposure so there is no need to spend extra money on organic produce.

If you choose organic anyway, look for produce that carries the “Certified Organic” label. Also, remember to thoroughly wash all produce with water. Washing will remove most of any remaining pesticides. Special fruit or vegetable rinses are not necessary. Water alone is just as effective.

Many studies have been done looking at pesticide exposure from commercially grown fruits and vegetables. These studies show very little proof of cancer risk from pesticides and other chemical residues in foods. Frightening headlines or web sites stating that pesticides cause cancer are based solely on animal studies using doses of pesticides high above those normally found in foods. Additionally, the United States regulates the use of pesticides to keep amounts at safe levels.

What are the recommendations for a cancer-protective diet after cancer treatment?

Research has shown that there are diet and lifestyle factors that, in general, seem to be protective against cancer. However, there is little research on the affect of diet in preventing the recurrence of cancers.

Recommendations for diet and nutrition after treatment for cancer are based on what has been shown to prevent cancer.

These recommendations include to:

- Eat a high fiber and low fat diet. Choose whole grains, fruits and vegetables more often. A minimum of 25 gm of fiber a day is recommended.
- Eat a minimum of 2-4 servings of fruits and 3-5 servings of vegetables per day.
- Reduce saturated fats, which are mostly from animal foods (beef fat, butter, high fat dairy products, etc. Choose low fat dairy products and limit red meat and processed meats (sausage, hot dogs, etc.). Use healthy vegetable oils (canola, olive oil) in cooking instead of butter or margarine Include food sources of calcium. Eat dairy foods, calcium-fortified juices, broccoli, canned salmon and sardines (with bones). Aim for about 1000 mg calcium daily. Take a calcium supplement if needed

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- Eat foods high in folate (folic acid) such as orange juice, dried beans, spinach, broccoli and fortified cereals and breads. A multivitamin will provide 100 percent of the Daily Value
- Limit alcohol
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Exercise

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