

# Eat for Maximum Health When Undergoing Cancer Treatment

*These digestion-friendly ideas will help ensure you continue to meet your daily nutrition requirements.*

It's easy to lose focus on healthy eating when you're undergoing cancer treatments, as not everything tastes good or is easy on your digestive system. But getting your daily dose of nutrition is incredibly important when your body is fighting invasive cells. Here's how to ensure you get the comfort you want without getting nutritionally sidetracked.

**Follow the "BRAT" formula.** Common advice health-care professionals give to people undergoing cancer treatment is to eat bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast (BRAT). These comfort foods are soothing to the digestive tract and contain healthy nutrients. Bananas and applesauce contain soluble fiber, which helps harden stools to prevent diarrhea, and potassium, vitamins A and B<sub>6</sub>, and magnesium. Whole-grain toast contains insoluble fiber, but is loaded with calcium, potassium, magnesium, phosphorus, selenium, and folate (vitamin B<sub>9</sub>).

"While insoluble fiber can't be digested and can exacerbate cramping and diarrhea, soluble fiber creates more of a gel inside the gastrointestinal tract and is gentler on the system," explains Rachel Lustgarten, a registered dietitian nutritionist with Weill Cornell Medicine.

**Carry dry, filling snacks.** Crackers, nuts, cheese, and even cooked chickpeas are great for soothing stomachs, and they're easy to transport in a small baggie. Nuts contain soluble fiber, while legumes such as chickpeas contain both soluble and insoluble fiber.

**Eat plain, soft foods.** Take a break from hot and spicy meals and eat simply: for example, plain Greek yogurt with a scrambled egg and a slice of whole-grain toast. Mashed sweet potatoes, or lentil soup make perfect side dishes or snacks. Add ginger or peppermint to drinks or meals to soothe nausea.

**Get your protein.** "Keeping up your protein intake is important for healing

and maintaining lean body mass," says Lustgarten. In addition to seafood, poultry, and lean meats, "Try beans, pulses, legumes, nuts, seeds, string cheese, yogurt, and hard-boiled eggs."

**Plan ahead.** Stock your cabinets and fridge prior to treatment so you always have exactly what you need without running out. Cook a large amount of one meal that can be separated into single-serving containers and then frozen for easy access later.

"Since appetite and tolerance to certain foods can vary during cancer treatment, it's important for patients to plan the what, when, and how of their meals and snacks," says Lustgarten. "Setting aside time to grocery shop and meal prep—or taking friends and family up on their offers to help out—will pay off in a big way when someone is not feeling up to cooking after treatment."

**Reduce meal sizes, but eat more often.** It may be easier on your digestive system to take smaller bites and consume smaller portions.

**Stay hydrated.** In addition to water, keep Gatorade on hand for electrolytes, as well as tea and apple or grape juice for their disease-fighting antioxidants. "Adequate hydration is always important, but even more so during cancer treatments when people might suffer excess fluid losses from diarrhea or increased fluid needs when following a low-fiber/low-residue diet to help combat constipation."

**Schedule fruits and vegetables between treatments.** Roughage can be difficult on the digestive system immediately after a treatment, but in the days leading up to your next treatment when you are feeling your



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## WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ...

*Foods with soluble fiber:*

- |                           |                  |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| ◆ Apples, applesauce      | ◆ Citrus fruits  |
| ◆ Avocados                | ◆ Farro          |
| ◆ Bananas                 | ◆ Nuts           |
| ◆ Barley                  | ◆ Oats, Oatmeal  |
| ◆ Beans, legumes, lentils | ◆ Seeds          |
| ◆ Broccoli                | ◆ Strawberries   |
| ◆ Brussels sprouts        | ◆ Sweet Potatoes |
|                           | ◆ Turnips        |

best, be sure to get a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, especially dark, leafy greens and those with bright red or orange coloring, such as carrots for their beta-carotene and grapes for their resveratrol.

"If raw vegetables, which are high in insoluble fiber, are hard to digest following treatment, try blending greens in smoothies or steaming them and making them into "rices" (finely chopped cauliflower or broccoli)," says Lustgarten. This may be easier to enjoy. "Also, many fruits and vegetables can be enjoyed in a steamed or pureed state, as in soups or dips."

**Stock chicken bouillon.** There's nothing more soothing when you're not feeling well than hot chicken broth. But if you don't have the time or energy to make soup from scratch, you can give yourself a comforting cup of chicken broth simply by adding one bouillon cube to one cup of hot water. A bouillon cube is also a good item to carry in a sealed bag when you're on the go. All you need is a cup of hot water and something to stir it with. 🍲