



**HEAD & NECK CANCER**  
AUSTRALIA  
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# DIET AND NUTRITION



# DIET, NUTRITION AND HEAD AND NECK CANCER TREATMENT

This information aims to help you understand how the treatment of head and neck cancer may affect your diet and nutrition. It may help answer some of your questions and help you think of other questions that you may want to ask your cancer care team; it is not intended to replace advice or discussion between you and your cancer care team.

## HOW HEAD AND NECK CANCER MAY AFFECT NUTRITION

Head and neck cancer may make it hard to eat and drink. This may be because of the cancer itself or side effects of treatment. For example:

- Cancers in the throat may sometimes cause pain and difficulty swallowing.
- Chemotherapy and radiation therapy may change the way food tastes and reduces the enjoyment of food.
- Chemotherapy may make you vomit or feel sick (nauseous) and reduces your appetite.
- Radiation therapy may make the mouth dry, give you mouth sores and makes it difficult to chew or swallow.
- Surgery may change the mouth, throat or teeth and makes it hard to chew or swallow.

Even though eating and drinking may be difficult, it is important to try and keep your food intake up to avoid losing weight. Maintaining good nutrition can help you get through your treatment, reduce the risk of infection, recover more quickly, and keep your strength and energy levels up.

## WHO WILL I SEE AS PART OF MY CARE

A **dietitian** is an expert in food and nutrition who supports and educates people about their nutrition, diet and tube feeding. They will help you develop a plan so that you receive all the nutrients you need. During the appointment, they may also give you tips about how to make eating easier, staying well-hydrated and how to enjoy your food to help you avoid unplanned

weight loss. Further information on [diet and nutrition](#) is available on the [Head and Neck Cancer Australia website](#).

A **speech pathologist** is an expert in speech and swallowing. They can teach you ways to make swallowing easier before, during and after head and neck cancer treatment. Further information on [speech, voice and swallowing](#) is available on the [Head and Neck Cancer Australia website](#).

## DIET CHANGES DURING TREATMENT AND RECOVERY

During cancer treatment and recovery, your diet will need to be adapted to cope with your body's changing nutritional needs. For example, during treatment more protein and energy (calories) are needed than usual to avoid unplanned weight loss and help your recovery.

- If you are not already seeing a **dietitian**, ask your doctor for a referral to one that specialises in head and neck cancer.
  - Dietitians can give you practical suggestions on how to manage nutrition intake and staying well-nourished during and after treatment.
- You may also be referred to a **speech pathologist** if the mouth or throat is affected by cancer or its treatment.
  - Speech Pathologists can assist you with strategies to make it easier to swallow, such as choosing food that causes less discomfort when swallowing.
- Some treatments can change the taste or smell of food, or the feeling of food in your mouth, making it difficult to follow your regular diet. If this occurs, speak to your dietitian or other members of your cancer care team, who can discuss strategies to help you stay well nourished.
- In some cases, a [feeding tube](#) may be required. If this is the case for you, your doctor, dietitian and nurse will talk to you about what is involved. Further information on feeding tubes is available on the [Head and Neck Cancer Australia website](#).
  - Feeding tubes are usually temporary, until you recover enough so that you can eat more.
  - Some people may need feeding tubes for longer periods.

- In most cases, difficulties with eating and drinking get better after treatment has finished although it may take some time for the side effects to settle.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR STAYING WELL NOURISHED**

- Eat small meals or snacks more often if you have trouble eating a full meal.
- Eat a diet high in protein and energy (calories).
- Enrich meals by adding milk, milk powder, cheese or sauces to meals and try snacks such as bread or biscuits with dips or nut spreads, yoghurt or egg/ cheese sandwiches.
- Drink fluids that are high in energy (calories), such as milk, milkshakes, smoothies or juice. Your dietitian may recommend supplement drinks that are high in protein and energy (calories).
- Try doing some light physical activity, such as walking, before each meal to help improve your appetite.
- If you have a sore mouth or throat, choose softer foods and drink fluids that are high in energy (calories). You may also want to avoid foods that irritate such as citrus, vinegar, chips or toast.
- If you have difficulty swallowing, your speech pathologist may give you advice on which foods have the most suitable texture to help make swallowing more comfortable.
- Check with your doctor or dietitian before taking vitamin or mineral supplements or making other changes to your diet.

## **QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR CANCER CARE TEAM**

- Will my cancer treatment affect what I can eat and drink?
- Should I be on a special diet?
- Should I avoid any particular foods or drinks during treatment?
- How can I avoid losing weight during treatment?
- How long will my mouth and/or throat side effects take to heal?

- Do I need to change my diet after treatment ends?
- Should I take vitamin supplements?
- Do you think I would benefit from referral to a dietitian or speech pathologist?

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

The Cancer Council provides an information and support line to Australians affected by cancer. You can call 13 11 20 to speak with a specialist cancer professional about anything to do with cancer including diet and nutrition.

You can also find out more about diet and nutrition from the [Cancer Council's Nutrition and Cancer booklet](#).

You can read more about the possible effects of cancer treatments on your experience of eating from [Cancer Council's Understanding Taste and Smell Changes](#).

The Cancer Council in your state will offer a variety of programs to assist people with good nutrition. Contact the Cancer Council on 131120 to find the most suitable program for you.

You may want to write specific questions here to ask your doctor or cancer care team

### About Head and Neck Cancer Australia

Head and Neck Cancer Australia (formerly Beyond Five) is Australia's only charity dedicated to providing information and support to people living with head and neck cancer, caregivers, family and healthcare professionals.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia's mission is to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by head and neck cancer through education and access to support and to raise awareness of head and neck cancer nationally.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia supports people through their cancer journey, from diagnosis to treatment and life after cancer by providing comprehensive, easy to understand and easy to access information. We have the only Directory of Head and Neck Cancer services and support groups available in Australia and New Zealand helping people to find the right services and support when they need it most.

Phone: 1300 424 848

Email: [contact@headandneckcancer.org.au](mailto:contact@headandneckcancer.org.au)

Web: [www.headandneckcancer.org.au](http://www.headandneckcancer.org.au)

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