

Dietary Considerations

When you have cancer, your nutritional needs can change significantly due to the disease itself and the side effects of treatment. There isn't one "magic" cancer diet, but the general goal is to maintain strength, support your immune system, and manage side effects.

Here's a breakdown of the types of foods that are generally recommended, and some things to consider:

Key Principles for a Cancer Diet:

- **Prioritize Protein and Calories:** Cancer and its treatments can be very taxing on your body, leading to weight loss and muscle wasting. You may need more protein and calories than someone without cancer to help repair tissues, maintain muscle mass, and keep your energy levels up.
 - **Good sources of protein:** Lean meats (chicken, turkey, fish), eggs, dairy products (milk, yogurt, cheese), beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, and soy foods. Plant-based proteins are particularly rich in vitamins and minerals.
 - **Ways to increase calories:** Add healthy fats like avocado, olive oil, nut butters, nuts, and seeds to your meals. Drink calorie-dense beverages like smoothies and milkshakes.
- **Focus on Plant-Based Foods:** A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, and legumes is generally recommended. These foods provide essential vitamins, minerals, fiber, and antioxidants that can help protect cells and reduce inflammation.
 - **Aim for a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables:** "Eat the rainbow" to get a wide range of nutrients. Dark green and deep yellow vegetables, and citrus fruits are particularly beneficial.
 - **Choose whole grains:** Opt for whole-wheat bread, brown rice, oats, and whole-grain pasta over refined grains.
- **Include Healthy Fats:** Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, like those found in avocados, olive oil, walnuts, and fatty fish (salmon), are beneficial for combating inflammation and supporting overall health.
- **Stay Hydrated:** Cancer treatments and side effects like vomiting or diarrhea can lead to dehydration. Drink plenty of fluids throughout the day. Water is best, but other options include milk, sports drinks, clear broths, and herbal teas.

- **Eat Small, Frequent Meals:** Larger meals can be difficult to tolerate, especially if you're experiencing nausea or fatigue. Eating smaller, more frequent meals and snacks throughout the day can help ensure you get enough nutrients.
- **Food Safety is Crucial:** During cancer treatment, your immune system may be weakened. Be meticulous about food safety:
 - Wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly.
 - Cook meats, poultry, seafood, and eggs thoroughly.
 - Avoid raw or undercooked foods, unpasteurized dairy products, and deli meats.

Foods to Limit or Avoid (especially during treatment):

- **Highly Processed Foods:** These often contain empty calories, unhealthy fats, and added sugars, offering little nutritional value.
- **Red and Processed Meats:** Limit consumption of red meats (beef, pork, lamb) and processed meats (bacon, sausage, hot dogs) as they have been linked to an increased risk of certain cancers.
- **Excess Sugar:** While it's impossible to eliminate all sugar, aim to reduce added sugars in beverages, baked goods, and processed foods.
- **Alcohol:** It's generally recommended to avoid or limit alcohol consumption during cancer treatment.
- **Foods that Aggravate Side Effects:**
 - **Nausea/Vomiting:** Avoid high-fat, greasy, spicy, or strong-smelling foods. Opt for bland, dry foods like crackers or toast.
 - **Mouth Sores/Difficulty Swallowing:** Choose soft, moist, and mild-temperature foods. Avoid acidic, spicy, sharp, or crunchy foods. Blended foods and smoothies can be helpful.
 - **Taste Changes:** If red meat tastes metallic, try chicken, turkey, or dairy. If foods taste bland, try adding herbs, spices, vinegars, or fruit juices.

Important Considerations:

- **Individualized Needs:** Your diet should be tailored to your specific type of cancer, treatment plan, side effects, and overall health. What works for one person may not work for another.

- **Consult a Professional:** It's highly recommended to work with an oncology dietitian or your healthcare team. They can provide personalized nutrition advice and help you manage treatment side effects through dietary adjustments.
- **No "Miracle" Diets:** Be wary of "cancer-fighting" diets that promise to cure cancer or are overly restrictive. There is no scientific evidence to support such claims, and these diets can sometimes lead to nutritional deficiencies.

By focusing on a balanced, nutrient-dense diet and working closely with your healthcare providers, you can better support your body during cancer treatment and recovery.