

## FEATURE STORY

# During Treatment: Nutrition Facts

*Answers to important questions about nutrition and diet*

## Should I take supplements during cancer therapy?

Surveys find a common reaction for newly diagnosed cancer patients is to load up on vitamins at the health food store to help reduce the toxic effects of chemotherapy, and perhaps even to potentially help fight the cancer. Unfortunately, overloading on certain dietary supplements may do more harm than good.

Maintaining a healthy diet is important during treatment. For patients unable to do so, doctors and dietitians may recommend dietary supplements, including vitamins. However, many oncologists discourage patients from using excessive amounts of supplements during treatment. The Food and Drug Administration issued long-sought rules in 2007 to make sure vitamins and other supplements are manufactured safely and contain what they promise.

So what's the answer for cancer patients trying to balance their nutritional needs during cancer treatment with any possible dangers of taking too many dietary supplements? With no cookie-cutter approach to supplements, each situation must be considered independently, and you should always consult your doctor before using supplements.

## What can I do if I start losing/gaining weight during treatment?

A syndrome called cachexia (weight loss) is a common cancer side effect. Some patients, on the other hand, may gain weight during treatment, especially those with breast, prostate, or ovarian cancer. Chemotherapy and steroids may increase appetite and cause fluid retention—leading to treatment-related weight gain. Fatigue and decreased physical activity can also contribute.

Patients should limit calorie-dense foods, and instead increase intake of vegetables and fresh fruits to avoid weight gain. With approval from your doctor, walking daily will help fatigue, weight maintenance, and mobility. After treatment, ask your doctor about starting an exercise program and slowly increase the intensity to avoid injury. Some gyms and cancer centers have programs especially for cancer patients, and many oncology practices provide access to a dietitian with oncology experience.

## How can I stay hydrated during therapy?

Water is the most important nutrient in your diet. Dehydration occurs when the body takes in less fluid than it releases. It happens quickly when a patient has diarrhea, vomiting, or fever with sweating.

You may not have the desire or energy to eat or drink, so when you do feel thirsty, you may already be dehydrated. Symptoms include little or dark-colored urine, fatigue, sunken eyes, and skin that remains raised if pinched (called skin turgor). Signs of severe dehydration, such as low blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, and confusion, require immediate intravenous fluids.

Proper hydration can alleviate common side effects like constipation and fatigue, as well as rare but serious effects, such as kidney damage. Because the kidneys filter waste, chemicals, and excess compounds from the blood, intravenous fluids are given during some types of treatment. Drinking water before and after treatment is recommended to flush toxins through the kidneys and bladder quickly.

Patients with compromised immune systems can stay hydrated by drinking tap water if it is from a city water supply or municipal well serving a highly populated area. If water is not from a city water or municipal well, use boiled, distilled, or bottled water. (Bring tap water to a rolling boil for one minute.)

Sometimes water may not be enough since dehydrated patients are at risk of electrolyte imbalance. Pedialyte, Boost Breeze, broths, sports drinks, and other products can restore fluid and electrolyte balance in the body. Good hydration is one way you can stay as healthy as possible and feel better during and after treatment.