A Guide to Eating Well If You Have a Poor Appetite or Have Lost Weight

Information for patients, their families and friends

Many people find that their eating habits change as a result of illness or treatment. You may find that your appetite is poor or that the taste, texture or smell of food is different or you may have difficulty swallowing. Food plays an important part in our lives and it can be distressing when it becomes difficult to eat. However, it is still possible to eat well even if your eating habits have changed.

This leaflet contains some explanations about why you can’t eat as much as usual and some practical advice to help keep you nourished.

Treatments and medicines can affect how you feel about eating or it may just be the way your body has responded to your illness. Diarrhoea, constipation or feeling sick can stop you wanting to eat. Feeling low in mood, tiredness or pain can also make eating difficult.

You might find that your smaller appetite causes you to disagree with others over what you should eat. They might not realise that your illness is causing your lack of appetite and think that you are just not trying to eat.

If family members find it difficult to understand the change in your eating it can be helpful to try to explain what is happening to you. You can tell them that it is not their cooking but the way you feel that is affecting your appetite. Describe the things that you think they will be able to imagine. For example, describe something as being so dry and bland that it tastes like cardboard or that you feel you will be sick if you take one more mouthful.

Your quality of life is important. Listen to your body and try to eat what you can enjoy. Everyone’s appetite varies, so use good days to eat well and enjoy your food and remember on days you are less well it is ok to eat less.

If you have ongoing concerns about your eating discuss your symptoms with your Health Care Team. Some of these symptoms may be treatable in order to make eating less troublesome.
Hints and Tips

- Serve small portions on a small plate. Eating little and often is the best way to increase both your calories and protein. If you can manage, you should aim to have something nourishing to eat and/or drink every 2-3 hours.

- Soft, easily eaten foods such as soups and puddings can be just as nutritious as a main meal. Individual puddings such as trifles, custard, creamed rice, fruit pies; thick and creamy yogurts and mousses are quick and easy.

- Take your time eating. Chew foods well and try to rest after meals.

- Tempt your appetite by making meals look attractive.

- At times, drinking liquids may be easier than eating. Make use of full cream milk, e.g. in milkshakes, milky coffee, hot chocolate and malted milk drinks such as Ovaltine or Horlicks. Try to drink plenty fluids – ideally aim to have 6-8 cups every day.

- Have a glass of fresh fruit juice, blackcurrant squash or other vitamin C fortified squash e.g. Ribena or Robinsons every day.

- Mouth care – keep your mouth clean and fresh.

- Avoid drinking liquids just before a meal.

Make your food more nourishing by:

- Using full-cream milk (blue, gold top or jersey) for drinks, meals and cooking or, even better, replace with fortified milk. Fortified milk is rich and creamy and contains extra calories and protein. To make fortified milk, whisk 2-4 tablespoons of dried milk powder into 1 pint of full cream milk.

- Adding extra butter, margarine or vegetable oil to vegetables and potatoes.

- Be generous when spreading butter, mayonnaise, margarine, jam, marmalade, lemon curd, chocolate spread, peanut butter and other toppings.

- Adding extra cream to soups, potatoes, breakfast cereals or porridge and/or sugar/honey to drinks, breakfast cereals, sauces and puddings.

Avoid reduced fat, ”low fat”, ”diet” or reduced sugar products as they are lower in calories.
Milk Shakes and Smoothies

If you have a blender, make up your own milk shakes and smoothies using full-cream milk and any combination of fruit, ice-cream and full fat yogurt. Sweeten with honey or buy ready-made varieties such as Yazoo or Nesquick. You will find them beside the fresh milk or long-life milk products in the shops.

Complan and Meritene

These nutritional supplements are sold in chemists and supermarkets. Sweet and savoury flavours are available. Use them as a nourishing between-meal snack or to replace a meal if you cannot face food.

Making meal times easier

- Ready made meals – frozen, chilled or packets are suitable.
- Take up any offers of help with cooking and shopping from neighbours, friends and family.
- You may wish to consider a supermarket or a meal delivery service. Ask a healthcare professional about services available in your area.
- Most people find that they eat better when they eat in company. This could be with friends or family or at a local lunch club.
- If you have dental problems or ill fitting dentures, contact your dentist for advice.

Note: The information in this leaflet is intended only as a general guide. It should not replace the advice of your doctor or health care team.