

The importance of nutrition in fighting cancer

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As many of us know all too well, a cancer diagnosis for you or a loved one is a sea change. While day-to-day life goes on, cancer symptoms and the ongoing effects of treatments usher in a myriad of adjustments. Typically, our food preferences and eating habits are deeply entrenched, and therefore, getting optimally supportive nutrition can be challenging, but it is vitally important.



As Registered Dietitian and spokesperson for ADSA, ([The Association for Dietetics in South Africa](#)), Omy Naidoo points out, “Cancer propels the body into a catabolic state where both muscle mass and fat are breaking down, therefore the nutritional needs of cancer patients increases. To meet this, there needs to be a careful focus on protein, calorie and vitamin intake. Unfortunately, this need for increased nutrition comes at a time when it’s highly common to experience a general loss of appetite and the side effects of treatment that can seriously impair a patient’s interest in eating. This makes a focus on nutrition a critical part of a patient’s cancer journey.”

Revealing a cancer diagnosis in your circle often opens the floodgates to well-meaning nutritional advice that can lead to going down unhelpful ‘rabbit-holes’. There’s a mass of information and promotion around ‘alternative’ or ‘natural’ cancer nutritional support, even cancer ‘nutritional cures’. This can be overwhelming, confusing and frustrating during a vulnerable time. It is important to note that there is currently no scientific evidence that any particular food, food supplement or diet can cure cancer. Cancer patients in both the private and the public healthcare systems do have access to the support of a dietitian, who is the only health professional that has specifically qualified in evidence-based nutrition. If you’re feeling uncertain about what you or your loved one should be eating and drinking, it’s time to ask your doctor to help bring a dietitian onboard. It’s important to discuss any natural remedy you want to introduce with your doctor or dietitian to ensure that there are no unintended interactions with the treatment you are undergoing.

While nutritional support for cancer patients focuses on avoiding malnutrition, some foods are allies, and some are to be avoided. Another ADSA spokesperson, Registered Dietitian, Faaizah Laher puts it in a nutshell:

Foods to avoid during cancer treatment and recovery:

- Avoid or limit alcohol
- Avoid or limit highly refined, highly processed foods

- Limit foods high in sugar, including sweets, cakes and sugary drinks
- Limit foods that are high in salt
- Limit foods that are high in animal fats
- Avoid or limit cured meats such as bacon, ham and sausages

Focus instead on:

- Eating lots of fresh vegetables and fruits every day
- Enjoying lean animal protein such as chicken breast and fish
- Including more plant-based foods high in protein such as beans, lentils, peas, chickpeas, quinoa and soy-based foods
- Choosing whole-grain options such as brown bread, brown rice and wholewheat pasta
- Increasing your intake of nuts and seeds
- Focusing on sources of healthy fats such as olive oil, avocados and fatty fish like sardines

Tips for bypassing the typical nutritional roadblocks

Omy Naidoo says, “Cancer patients undergoing treatment often experience a severe loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, as well as dysgeusia which is taste alterations. Very often these patients need high protein, vitamin-containing supplements which they drink 2-3 times per day. Some patients need tailored diets to help them get through spells of nausea and vomiting, and this is exactly how your dietitian can help you. It’s important to remember that cancer patients need more nutrition, however, they typically end up taking in much less than usual due to these symptoms. The net effect of this is that patients can lose muscle mass and become malnourished. This is precisely what you want to avoid as malnutrition then becomes an independent risk factor for poorer outcomes.”

If you or a loved one are dealing with these challenges, then you need to reset your daily nutritional regime:

- Focus on smaller, lighter meals eaten more frequently than the standard three meals a day
- Experiment with healthy snack foods that are always on hand such as wholewheat crackers, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables
- Try out delicious nutrient-rich smoothies
- Add nuts and seeds to yoghurt, cereals, smoothies, and even casseroles
- Make frozen lolly treats from fresh fruit juices, fruit, yoghurt and smoothies
- Use nutritional supplements prescribed by your health professional

Most important is to remember that combatting malnutrition is your goal. Take action and get professional nutritional advice to help the cancer patient maintain their weight as best as possible.

Healthy nutrition also reduces your risk of cancer

While some risk factors for cancer cannot be changed, research shows that 30 to 50% of major cancers can be prevented by following a healthy lifestyle. Faaizah Laher says, “While there is no guaranteed way to prevent cancer, a healthy lifestyle can help reduce your risk of developing many cancers and positively support treatment and recovery if you are diagnosed with cancer. Think of eating the colours of a rainbow and lots of variety of nutritious foods (such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds and legumes). Along with healthy eating, an active lifestyle and maintaining a healthy weight play important roles in reducing risk and boosting your resilience.”

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