

# Eating well during treatment

Tips for helping children eat well when receiving treatment for cancer

**This information gives some ideas on how to maximise energy and nutrients in your child's diet. Not everybody reacts exactly the same way to treatment, so it is important to be aware of good nutrition to help your child cope with any diet-related problems that might occur. Regardless of any eating difficulties or effects of treatment, good nutrition is important for the whole family.**

## Offer a balanced diet

Good nutrition will help your child to:

- Maintain adequate growth.
- Help the body fight infections.
- Cope better with chemotherapy.
- Feel better and have more energy.

A balanced diet is one that contains a variety of foods from the major food groups. These include:

- Breads, cereals and grains, including rice, pasta, and breakfast cereals.
- Fruits including fresh, tinned and dried.
- Vegetables including fresh, dried, frozen and tinned.
- Meat and meat alternatives such as beef, chicken, fish, eggs and legumes.
- Dairy foods including milk, cheese and yoghurt.
- Fats including butter, oil and cream.

## Alternative diets and complementary and alternative medicines

Many diets and dietary supplements are suggested as a treatment for cancer. These may not have the essential nutrients for normal growth and good health and may be costly, hard to follow and impractical. Some may even be dangerous. It is essential to discuss any changes to diet, or plans to take a vitamin or mineral supplement with your child's consultant oncologist. Ask your doctor, dietitian or nurse for more detailed, appropriate information.

## Starting treatment

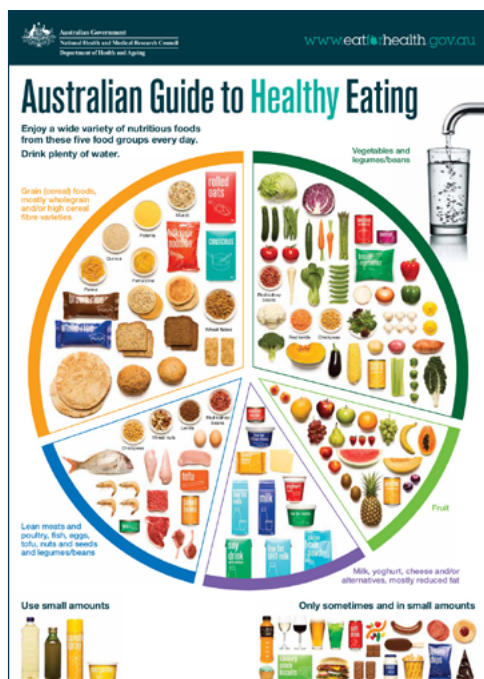
You may find that your child eats a little less than usual at the beginning of treatment and during chemotherapy sessions. Although there may be a small weight loss at this time, your child will usually regain the weight once they are feeling better.

Try not to bribe your child with sweets and food-based treats, as they may start to only eat or demand these foods later and want less of their usually accepted foods. This can also form habits that are difficult to change when treatment ends. Try reward charts or sticker charts to encourage your child to eat well.

It is best to offer foods that are the same as what the rest of the family is eating and that you know your child likes.

Although your child may seem fussier at times, continue to offer a variety of foods, even if they are sometimes refused. Try to stick with your usual routines, but be flexible as your child may not always eat the same way depending on their appetite. Meals may take a little longer at times, but try not to let them last longer than 30–40 minutes.

Some chemotherapy side effects may alter eating habits. See your dietitian for advice and information on how to deal with the most common side effects.



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### Good food hygiene

During treatment your child's ability to fight infections is reduced. Sometimes, bacteria can grow in food and cause infections such as gastroenteritis, which results in nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Follow these guidelines to ensure good food hygiene; they are particularly important when your child's blood count is low:

- Wash your hands thoroughly with warm soapy water before preparing any food.
- Always wash fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Store raw and cooked food in different sections of the fridge.
- Keep raw meats away from all other foods.
- Use a separate chopping board and knife for raw meats.
- Defrost and cook foods thoroughly, particularly meats.
- Keep perishable food refrigerated at 5°C or colder.
- If you're planning to cook and cool food for later use, cool it quickly (e.g. in shallow containers in the fridge).
- Do not leave cooked or other perishable food at room temperature for long:
  - If <2 hours you can put it back in the fridge.
  - Between 2 and 4 hours, eat it straight away.
  - After 4 hours, throw it away.
- Keep cooked food piping hot (more than 60°C) right up to serving.
- If reheating cold food, reheat it quickly to piping hot and do not reheat it more than once.
- Do not thaw frozen food at room temperature – thaw it in the fridge or use a microwave.
- Keep perishable leftovers in the fridge and use them up within a few days.
- Check 'use by' and 'best by' dates of foods.
- When transporting food, ensure chilled/frozen foods are transported with an icepack in an insulated food carry bag/esky.
- Your hospital will have specific food safety procedures for food consumption from external sources. Please request guidelines at your hospital for further details.

### Eating during low blood counts

If your child's blood count is very low, **avoid** foods that have a higher risk of bacterial contamination:

- Take caution when purchasing foods from takeaway shops. Especially if you cannot guarantee safe food hygiene practices have been followed i.e. food storage/preparation/temperature regulation.
- Paté and soft cheeses such as blue vein, ricotta, camembert, brie, and fetta. Soft cheeses are ok if they have been heated, e.g. on a pizza.
- Unwashed fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Avoid bruised/damaged fruits and vegetables, and fruits and vegetables that are difficult to wash thoroughly.
- Bought pre-prepared salads such as salad mix, coleslaw, potato salad, pre-packed fruit salads, and salads from buffets and salad bars.
- Unpasteurised dairy products and unpasteurised fruit juices.
- Soft-serve ice cream or self-serve frozen yoghurt, and takeaway smoothies such as those from a juice/smoothie bar.
- Uncooked/fermented deli meats such as salami, ham, cold sausage, prosciutto, mettwurst.
- Raw or partially cooked eggs.
- Raw/undercooked meats and seafood such as sushi, oysters, sashimi, ceviche.
- Uncooked herbs or herbal supplements .
- Raw sprouts, e.g. alfalfa.
- Any foods sourced from markets or outlets that are unpackaged/unlabelled e.g herbs, spices, nuts, dried fruits, lollies.



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### Bone marrow transplants

If your child is undergoing a bone marrow transplant, continue to follow the above guidelines. In addition, avoid the following sources of water:

- Bottled water.
- Spring water.
- Water from water coolers.
- Fountains (unless you know the filter is regularly changed).
- Tank water.

This is due to the potential risk of microorganisms in untreated water. These microorganisms are a common cause of gastroenteritis, and are associated with severe life-threatening illness among immuno-compromised individuals (such as those undergoing a bone marrow transplant).

Bottled water is manufactured by many different companies, making it difficult to guarantee that the water has been treated effectively.

Tap water in Australia is thoroughly treated and safe to drink.



### Hints for eating when your child feels unwell

- Offer small serves of food more frequently – perhaps five to six times a day to avoid getting too full or too empty.
- Offer cold foods that have little smell.
- Don't force your child, but encourage and praise your child when they eat.
- Eat meals in a well ventilated room to clear the smell of foods away.
- Sit and eat with your child.
- Snacks of salty dry biscuits and fizzy drinks may be better tolerated.
- Fluids are important, offer these regularly to sip.
- Offer a variety of foods.
- Keep portions of favourite foods in the freezer for quick access.
- Keep nutritious snacks handy so your child can get to them.
- Try not to fill up on low nutrient foods such as cordials, soft drinks and lollies as there will be less room for nutritious foods.
- Try foods that contain ginger such as ginger ale and ginger biscuits.

### What if my child loses weight?

Children with cancer have increased calorie and protein needs. If your child loses weight and is eating poorly, you should speak to your doctor, dietitian or nurse for further advice. Your dietitian can provide information about high-energy eating.

For more information about paediatric cancer, please visit [www.vics.org.au/pics](http://www.vics.org.au/pics).

**Good nutrition will help your child cope better with treatment.**

**Disclaimer:** This information is for educational purposes only and should not be seen as a substitute for advice from your doctor or other professional healthcare providers. If you have specific questions about the content of this information, or any other medical matter, it is recommended that you consult your doctor or other professional healthcare provider. This information is considered to be true and correct at the date of publication, however changes in circumstances after the time of publication may impact on the accuracy of this information.

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