

# Dealing with increased appetite when taking steroids

Nutrition information and tips for families

**Steroids are commonly used in the treatment of cancer in children. A common side effect of steroid treatment is an increase in appetite, resulting in rapid weight gain. This can be distressing for both children and their parents. In addition, children often crave high fat, salty foods while on steroid treatment which can further increase their calorie intake and weight gain.**

Some weight gain while on steroids is difficult to avoid. In some cases, some weight gain may be of benefit especially if your child has lost weight during chemotherapy or is likely to do so after future cycles of chemotherapy. If the period of steroid treatment is relatively brief, it is a good chance for your child to regain some body weight and improve their nutritional status.

It is important to remember that some of the weight gained while on steroids is due to the fluid retention that accompanies steroid treatment.

However, it is important to aim to maintain your child's weight within a healthy range, therefore if your child has not lost weight before starting steroids or is already overweight then weight gain is undesirable.

The strategies below may help to minimise your child's weight gain while on steroids.

## Do

- Make sure your child eats three moderate sized meals plus 2–3 snacks per day. Ensure your child eats regularly so they are less likely to get to the point where hunger is overwhelming making eating difficult to control.
- Remember, it is difficult for your child to make good food choices whilst taking steroids, so it is important that healthy foods are the most accessible options. Try to have your kitchen well stocked with healthy meal and snack options.
- Discourage your child from frequently grazing or constantly eating throughout the day, as this is likely to lead to weight gain. Be firm about sticking to set meal and snack times.
- Grill, bake, BBQ, steam and roast rather than frying. Avoid adding fats and oil to cooking.
- Pack healthy snacks when going out.

- Try to distract your child from food with other activities such as playing games, reading and outdoor activities if they are well enough.
- Encourage your child to wait for 20 minutes after a meal or snack before eating more.
- Have a designated eating area in your home such as the dining room or kitchen table and encourage your child to eat all meals and snacks in this area.
- Ensure your child drinks plenty of fluids, preferably water or milk.



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### Don't

- Have high fat, high sugar, ultra-processed 'junk' foods in your home such as hot chips, potato crisps, lollies, and sweet biscuits. These foods can be hard to resist, especially for a child on steroids, and will contribute to weight gain - particularly when eaten in excess.
- Have highly processed foods, such as chicken nuggets.
- Offer juice, soft drink, and cordial, as these contain large amounts of sugar which will contribute to weight gain.
- Allow your child to eat in front of a TV or screen.
- Buy take away food, which is often high in calories.

### Try these healthy snack options

- Air popped popcorn with salt/spices (no butter)
- Low sugar yoghurt, e.g. greek style yoghurt
- Veggie sticks (e.g. carrots, celery, capsicum, cucumber) with dips (hummus)
- Fruit kebabs
- Rice crackers/cakes, with low fat dip or vegemite/jam/peanut butter/cheese and tomato on top.
- Smoothie/milkshake made with fruit, milk, and yoghurt
- Baked beans or spaghetti
- Vegetable soup
- Fresh fruit or a small handful of dried fruit
- Sweetcorn cob
- Multigrain English muffins
- High fibre breakfast cereals, such as Weetbix, museli, porridge, oats
- Pita bread or crumpet with cheese or vegemite
- Raisin toast with light cream cheese spread.



Fortunately, an increase in appetite generally only lasts while your child is on steroid treatment and their appetite should return to normal when steroids are stopped. As a result, your child is likely to gradually return to their usual weight as their food intake decreases.

When your child is being weaned off steroids, their appetite may decrease to the point where they are eating very little. This is the body's way of returning to its usual weight and is generally not a cause for concern. Once their weight begins to return to baseline, their appetite will stabilise and your child should return to their usual eating habits.

**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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