

Nutrition Considerations for Pancreatic Cancer Patients

Pancreatic cancer can cause loss of appetite, unintended weight loss, and have special nutritional considerations following surgery. Making the healthiest choices possible to maintain good nutrition can help pancreatic cancer patients minimize the side effects of treatment, recover from surgery and maintain their best quality of life.

Coping with Weight Loss and Loss of Appetite

Side effects or symptoms such as loss of appetite, malabsorption, nausea and vomiting can cause a patient to consume fewer calories than the body needs to maintain an appropriate weight. Weight loss and malnutrition can have a significant impact on quality of life, daily functioning, response to treatment, length of hospital stays and complications such as infections.

Tumor-induced weight loss, also known as cancer cachexia, is a complex problem that affects the way the body uses calories and protein. Cancer cachexia can cause the body to burn more calories than usual, break down muscle protein and decrease appetite. If a person is consuming regular meals and snacks but is losing weight, they may be experiencing cancer cachexia. The following tips may help increase appetite, improve interest in eating and assist in controlling weight loss:

- Get plenty of rest.
- Exercise lightly before meals to stimulate appetite. Even a short walk may help.
- Select enjoyable foods and foods that have a pleasant aroma.
- Aim for 6-8 small meals and snacks per day.
- Eat meals and snacks at scheduled times, even if not hungry.
- Substitute a meal with a nutritional supplement drink or a homemade smoothie made with protein powder. If you have been prescribed pancreatic enzymes, be sure to take them with these drinks.
- Take anti-nausea medication at the first sign of queasiness or nausea. Delay eating favorite foods if feeling nauseous.
- Consult with a registered dietitian for nutrition counseling.
- Eat calorie-rich, nutrient-dense foods and try not to consume foods or liquids with little nutritional value, such as soft drinks.
- Restrict or avoid any foods that may cause or worsen diarrhea.
- Ask the doctor or dietitian whether pancreatic enzymes may be helpful.
- Check with the doctor to see if medications to stimulate appetite would be helpful in controlling weight loss.

If poor appetite and weight loss persist, speak to your doctor as they may prescribe medication to increase your appetite.



Keep a daily journal of diet. In addition to the foods and the amounts eaten, also record daily weight, amount of pancreatic enzymes used, frequency and consistency of bowel movements, and blood glucose readings (if applicable). This information can be useful in tracking nutritional progress and can help the doctor or dietitian make further recommendations.

Special thanks to our friends and partners at the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network for sharing this information with Pancreatic Cancer Canada and our community.

