

5 Top Tips for preparing to eat well before radiotherapy to the head and neck area

This handout is to help you prepare for your treatment, and to know when to ask for help.

Head and neck radiotherapy can have a big impact on your nutrition. It is best to prepare before you start.

1. Maintain your current weight

- During radiotherapy your body needs more energy and protein than usual. It is important to start treatment with a stable weight and eating well.
- Eating well to maintain weight can help keep you out of hospital. It can also help you to recover faster after your treatment.
- Treatment is more accurate when your radiotherapy mask continues to fit well. If you lose a lot of weight during treatment, you may need to have a new mask fitted which could delay your treatment.

2. No need to cut out food groups – all foods fit in cancer treatment

- It is common to want to take control of your eating to be as healthy as possible when facing cancer treatment.
- The most important change is making sure you're eating enough and regularly.
- Make sure you discuss any big changes to your diet with your dietitian first.
- Well-meaning family and friends may suggest special diets for people with cancer. It is important to fact check these with your dietitian and treatment team.

3. Start a routine with your nutrition before treatment

- Try to eat 3 meals each day and some snacks in between meals.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Aim for at least 2 litres each day to prevent dehydration.
- It can be useful to write down a few days of your usual eating patterns leading up to your treatment. Your dietitian will likely ask you about this.

4. Protein is the building block of muscle

Protein is important to keep you strong before, during and after your cancer treatment.

Try to include protein rich foods in every meal.

Protein rich foods include:

- Meat, chicken, or fish/ seafood
- Eggs
- Full fat milk products (milk, cheese, yoghurt, custard)
- Nuts and nut butters (e.g. peanut)
- Lentils and legumes (e.g. baked beans, chickpeas)
- Tofu and tempeh

5. Food preparation hints

- If your treatment is away from home, consider what food preparation facilities will be available for you to use.
- A hand-held blender can be very useful for blending food and fluids if your mouth or throat become sore.
- Consider soft/moist frozen meals and tinned soup if you do not feel like cooking or do not have access to a kitchen.
- Consider preparing frozen meals in advance as you may not feel like making a meal.

How can my team help me achieve this?

There may be many different members of your treatment team. They will be here to support you before, during and after your treatment.

Ask for your dietitian if:

- You are eating less than normal.
- You are losing weight.
- You have side effects which are stopping you from eating as much. These may include nausea, loss of taste or appetite, or constipation for example.
- You have had surgery which has affected your ability to eat enough.

Ask for your speech pathologist if:

- You are having trouble swallowing, pain in your mouth or throat, or you are coughing on your foods or fluids.
- You have had surgery which has affected your ability to eat, talk or swallow.