

understanding your condition

Cancer

Receiving a medical diagnosis, such as cancer, may be overwhelming and scary. Learning about the condition, and how to cope with it, can make it more manageable.

Condition Introduction

Cancer is not just one disease. There are many different types and forms of cancer, and it can start in any place in the body. In all types of cancer, cells begin to divide uncontrollably and start crowding out normal, healthy cells. When the healthy cells become crowded by cancer cells, it can become difficult for them to work the way they should. This can make it challenging to carry on with every day activities.

Fortunately, cancer can be treatable for many people. There are a variety of treatment options available, many specifically made for certain types of cancer. You may hear these medications called “chemotherapy,” “targeted drugs,” or “biologics.” Chemotherapy is often used to kill or slow the growth of cancer cells or help keep tumors from returning. Targeted drugs and biologics work on the genes within certain cancer cells, stopping them from working correctly and continuing to multiply. Historically, most cancer drugs were given through an IV, but now, many newer cancer drugs are pills or capsules that can be taken by mouth. This allows patients to take the medication in the comfort of their own home. Like many medications, there are a variety of side effects that can occur from taking anti-cancer drugs. Nutrition plays a key role in managing the side effects of both cancer medications and the cancer itself. To learn more, see the chart below.

How Nutrition is Affected by Cancer

Anti-cancer drugs, as well as cancer itself, can cause a wide variety of issues leading to nutritional concerns. **To better understand cancer, common side effects, and how nutrition is affected, see the table below for more details.**

Affected Region	General Overview	How Nutrition is Affected
GI Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appetite Loss (anorexia): Appetite loss or feeling full after only eating a small amount (early satiety) can be a result of both the cancer itself as well as cancer treatments. • Taste/Smell Changes: Certain cancer drugs may change the way foods taste and/or smell. Some people find they have very little sense of taste, while others complain of a heightened sense of metallic, bitter, salty or sweet tastes. • Swallowing Problems (dysphagia): Swallowing problems can happen for those going through cancer treatments due to a cancer-related blockage, severe swelling, or nerve issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor appetite can result in weight loss, being low in certain nutrients, dehydration, and/or malnutrition. • Having an altered sense of smell or taste can lower appetite, resulting in being low in certain nutrients and weight loss. • Swallowing problems may lead to dehydration, weight loss, and being low in certain nutrients.

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Affected Region	General Overview	How Nutrition is Affected
Mouth Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Painful Mouth and Throat (mucositis and esophagitis): Certain types of cancer treatments may cause inflammation in the mouth and throat resulting in painful sores or ulcers. • Dry Mouth (xerostomia): Certain cancer therapies can damage the glands that make saliva or simply cause dry mouth. Having less saliva can make it difficult to chew, swallow, or even talk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued inflammation and pain in the mouth and throat can cause eating difficulties, resulting in weight loss, dehydration, and being low in certain nutrients. • The eating difficulties associated with dry mouth can result in weight loss and being low or deficient in many nutrients.
Difficulty Eating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appetite Loss (anorexia): Appetite loss or feeling full after only eating a small amount (early satiety) can be a result of both the cancer itself as well as cancer treatments. • Taste/Smell Changes: Certain cancer drugs may change the way foods taste and/or smell. Some people find they have very little sense of taste, while others complain of a heightened sense of metallic, bitter, salty or sweet tastes. • Swallowing Problems (dysphagia): Swallowing problems can happen for those going through cancer treatments due to a cancer-related blockage, severe swelling, or nerve issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor appetite can result in weight loss, being low in certain nutrients, dehydration, and/or malnutrition. • Having an altered sense of smell or taste can lower appetite, resulting in being low in certain nutrients and weight loss. • Swallowing problems may lead to dehydration, weight loss, and being low in certain nutrients.
Mood Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A cancer diagnosis and undergoing cancer treatment can cause a change in your mood. During cancer treatments, you may feel a variety of emotions, which may include depression, anger, anxiety, helplessness, or fear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional changes, like depression and anxiety, may make people eat more or less than they would normally. Eating too much could result in weight gain. Eating too little could result in nutrient deficiencies and unintended weight loss. These changes can also affect interest in grocery shopping and food preparation, which could lead to malnutrition over time.
Fatigue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fatigue, or a lack of energy, is a common side effect of many cancer drugs, as well as the disease itself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fatigue can result in poor food intake, weight loss, or potentially weight gain, if choosing unhealthy convenience foods combined with lower activity levels.

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Side Effects Overview

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Cancer Medication Side Effects

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Some of the most common side effects include mouth sores, nausea and vomiting, dry mouth, lactose intolerance, and diarrhea and constipation. Depending on the drug being used, length of treatment, and the type of cancer, side effects can vary from person to person. Understanding the side effects can help you take charge of your health. Refer to the chart below to review other side effects related to cancer treatments. It's always best to discuss current side effects and new changes that develop with your health care provider. To better understand your condition, it's important to discuss with your healthcare provider what symptoms you're experiencing, including how often, and how severe.

To learn more about side effects from cancer medications, see the table to the right.

Most Common Symptoms

- Dry mouth (xerostomia)
- Upset stomach (nausea)
- Constipation
- Poor appetite
- Feeling full after eating or drinking a small amount
- Oral thrush (a fungal infection of the mouth)
- Fatigue
- Changes to taste/smell
- Inflammation of the moist tissue lining the inside of the mouth and esophagus (mucositis/esophagitis)
- Low numbers of certain types of blood cells
- Skin changes (dry skin, rashes, discoloration)
- Weight loss
- Weight gain
- Lactose intolerance
- Hair loss

Severe Symptoms

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Pain
- Pain or difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)
- Infection
- Problems with certain organs (liver, kidneys, heart)