

Poor Appetite Information for Patients

Poor Appetite

Loss of appetite is a loss of the desire to eat – essentially the loss of hunger. It is sometimes referred to as “anorexia” and is not the same as nausea or the feeling of wanting to vomit/throw up. It is experienced in many diseases, very often with cancer, and can be as a result of other physical symptoms such as pain, nausea, constipation and anxiety.

Whilst being able to eat does not change the course of your illness, it may help you to feel better mentally and emotionally, it may give you more energy and it may also improve your quality of life.

The important thing to remember is try not to think too much about what you eat, if you feel like it, have it. Don't be disappointed if something works one day and not the next, this is common. Be flexible and make eating as enjoyable as possible.

If poor appetite is a problem for you, please discuss it with your health care professional. It may just be that you are feeling too tired or 'fed up' to bother eating much.

Try some of the following tips:

Food preparation

- Allow yourself to eat smaller portions - you can always have extra if you are still hungry
- You may find that serving food on a smaller plate helps
- Try using smaller utensils e.g., a teaspoon
- Avoid foods with strong smells
- If possible have someone else prepare and cook the food
- If you have a metallic taste in your mouth try using plastic utensils

Mouth care

- Keeping your mouth fresh and clean before and after meals can help a poor appetite - see '*Mouth and Swallowing problems*' information sheet

Distractions

- Watching TV, reading or listening to music at meal times may help
- Eat with family or friends when possible

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Drinks

- Try using a straw for drinks
- Even if you are not hungry try to keep drinking
- For ideas see the 'Nourishing Drinks' information sheet
- If you usually enjoy alcohol, a small drink can help your appetite and is safe to take (in moderation) with painkillers

Quick and easy snack suggestions:

Sweet

Breakfast cereal
Fruit e.g., fresh, dried or canned
Puddings, custard, yoghurt/dairy food
Ice-blocks
Ice-cream
Frozen yoghurt
Fruit juice
Jelly
Milk / flavored milk

Savory

Crackers
Eggs e.g., poached, scrambled
Cheese/dip/nuts/peanut butter
Pizza
Popcorn
Soups
Sandwiches/toast
Pita bread
Vegetable Juice drinks

What to eat and when?

There are no rules but try some of the following

- Eat little and often because hunger can make symptoms worse
- Eat when you feel hungry – even if it's not a meal time
- Eat in the morning when your appetite may be better
- Keep a variety of snacks handy
- Choose foods which are easily digested such as: soup, eggs, milk puddings, crackers, stewed fruit, mashed vegetables with gravy, macaroni cheese
- Try foods with different tastes (e.g., salty, sour, sweet), textures (e.g., smooth, crunchy) and temperatures (e.g., cold, warm, hot)
- If you usually follow a low fat or diabetic diet (or other special diet) it is now **more important that you eat what you enjoy** even if it was previously not allowed. Discuss with your nurse if you are unsure

This is a general guide, not a complete resource. It has been prepared for patients and families receiving palliative care.

If you have further questions, ask your health care professional.