

Patient information factsheet

Eating and drinking during head and neck radiotherapy

While you are having radiotherapy treatment for cancer of the head and neck, you may find that eating and drinking become more difficult than usual. This factsheet contains dietary advice and tips to help you maintain your weight while you are having treatment. We hope it helps to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact us using the details at the end of this factsheet.

Side effects of radiotherapy on eating and drinking

Having radiotherapy to the head and neck can cause side effects which make it difficult for you to eat and drink as you usually would. This can lead to weight loss. These side effects include:

- a dry mouth
- a sore mouth
- loss of appetite
- pain when chewing or swallowing
- taste changes or loss of taste
- thick saliva or lack of saliva

It's important that you stay the same weight while you are having treatment to ensure your radiotherapy mask fits correctly. If you lose weight, your mask may need to be remade and this can cause delays in your treatment.

Not eating and drinking enough throughout your treatment can also lead to:

- a longer recovery time after treatment
- a reduced ability to tolerate treatment
- delayed healing and increased risk of infection
- feeling tired
- a delay to your treatment or it being stopped completely

How to manage the side effects of radiotherapy

If your mouth is sore

- Avoid acidic foods (for example, tomatoes and citrus fruits)
- Avoid spicy foods
- Avoid any food or drink that is too hot or too cold
- Avoid alcohol
- Ensure you are using sufficient pain relief (we will discuss this weekly with your doctor or specialist radiographer)

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If your mouth is dry

- Drink water regularly throughout the day
- Choose foods with extra sauces where possible
- Take care when eating foods that are difficult to chew and break down (for example, meat and bread)

If you have pain on chewing and swallowing

- Eat softer foods (such as yoghurts, scrambled egg or mashed potato)

If you have a small or reduced appetite

- Avoid having drinks immediately before your meals (these can fill you up before you eat)
- Choose a variety of foods (changing what you eat can help to keep things interesting)
- Drink milky drinks and nourishing fluids on a regular basis
- Eat little and often
- Try having small, regular meals and snacks (six small meals are as good as three large main meals)

Tips for maintaining your weight

Maintaining your weight is important for your treatment. If you start to lose weight:

- try to eat more high calorie snacks
- fortify your food (add nutrients to your foods to make them more energy and protein rich)

We have included a few high calorie snack ideas for you to try in the table below:

High calorie snacks	Calories	Protein
50g of hummus	142kcal	3.2g
50g of avocado	80kcal	1g
1 x mashed banana	75kcal	0g
120g pot of full fat yoghurt	140kcal	5.4g
125g pot of custard	124kcal	3.5g
100g pot of crème caramel	174kcal	4.2g
2 x scoops (100g) of ice cream	100kcal	2g

We have included a few ways you can fortify your food in the table below:

Ingredients to fortify food	Calories	Protein	Example
30g of cheese	125kcal	7.6g	A tin of soup is 200kcal but if you add two tablespoons of double cream, it increases the calories to 340kcal.
30g of cream cheese	75kcal	1.4g	
1 tablespoon of oil	120kcal	0g	
1 tablespoon of butter	75kcal	0g	
2 tablespoons of double cream	140kcal	0.5g	
1 tablespoon of peanut butter	95kcal	3.7g	
1 tablespoon of honey	50kcal	0g	
1 tablespoon of mayonnaise	100kcal	0g	

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Fortified milk recipe

You can use fortified milk throughout the day in your cereal and hot drinks (for example, tea, coffee and hot chocolate), or drink it on its own. See our recommended recipe below:

Ingredients

- 4 tablespoons skimmed milk powder
- 1 pint full fat milk

Method

1. Mix all the milk powder and a small amount of the milk into a paste.
2. Mix in the rest of the milk.
3. Use the fortified milk as you would use fresh milk. Aim to use at least 1 pint per day.

Prescribed oral nutritional supplement (ONS) drinks

ONS drinks are high in calories, protein, vitamins and minerals. There are a wide variety of nutritional supplements depending on your preferences. If we think you need additional nutritional support, we will advise you on what is best to take and when to start taking it.

If you need ONS drinks, we will either give these to you or your general practitioner (GP) will prescribe these for you.

Feeding tube

You may need to have a feeding tube fitted while you are having head and neck radiotherapy treatment. If this is the case, we will discuss this with you in more detail.

Problems with swallowing

If during your treatment you experience problems with swallowing, we will refer you to a speech and language therapist for further assessment.

Contact us

If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact us.

Head and neck dietitians

Telephone: **023 8120 6072**

Mobile: **07909 886314**

Email: hndietitians@uhs.nhs.uk

Working hours: Monday to Friday, 8am to 4.30pm

Useful links

Cancer Research UK

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy/side-effects/head-and-neck-radiotherapy

Macmillan

www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/head-and-neck-cancer/side-effects-of-radiotherapy-for-head-and-neck-cancer

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