

Esophageal Cancer and Diet During Treatment



Question:

My husband has just been diagnosed with esophageal cancer. What foods should I be offering to him, since he needs both calorically dense and soft foods that he can swallow until the tumor shrinks from the radiation therapy?

Answer:

It is important to maintain good nutritional intake and weight throughout treatment. Patients who maintain their weight are better able to tolerate treatment and avoid treatment interruptions. As long as it is possible and safe, it is recommended that you continue to eat a soft, pureed or full liquid diet. Include fruit and vegetable juices, as well as good protein sources like milk, powdered milk, tofu, meats or ice cream to keep nutrition quality high.

Before you start cooking, it's important to have plenty of healthy foods on hand that are easy to swallow. Look for soft foods that don't require much chewing, like pudding, yogurt, applesauce, ice cream, bananas, pastas, Jell-O, smoothies, and other easy to swallow foods and snacks. Liquid foods like Soups, broths, and liquid nutritional supplement drinks are good options that provide needed nutrition and are easily tolerated.

There are many healthy and nutritious foods which can be difficult for a patient with esophageal cancer to swallow, including fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, and meats. These foods can all be prepared in a new way making them easier to eat. Mash or purée these foods, and mix them with a little broth or water to thin them. You might have to look at various cooking techniques to help make the foods soft and easy to swallow without avoiding ingredients that normally make up a healthy, balanced diet.

Because cancer of the esophagus often causes trouble swallowing, it can lead to weight loss and weakness due to poor nutrition. A Registered Dietitian/Nutritionist

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can work with you to provide nutritional supplements and information about your individual nutritional needs. This can help you maintain your weight and nutritional intake.

If eating becomes difficult before, during, or after treatment, or you are experiencing weight loss, please consult with your oncologist about having a feeding tube placed, as this can help prevent weight loss and poor nutrition. Signs that it might be time to have a feeding tube placed are: coughing or sputtering when drinking liquids, a decrease in intake due to soreness, and weight loss that continues for more than two weeks.

A Registered Dietitian at your cancer center should be able to guide you throughout your treatment regarding ways to maximize your nutrition. If your cancer center does not have an RD, you can locate one by accessing The Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics [website](#) or searching [here](#). Look for a dietitian in your area with knowledge and expertise in cancer or oncology.

Soft food cook book suggestions:

- [The I-Can't-Chew Cookbook: Delicious Soft Diet Recipes for People with Chewing, Swallowing, and Dry Mouth Disorders](#) (Paperback) By Mark A. Piper (Foreword) and J. Randy Wilson
- [Easy-to-Swallow, Easy-to-Chew Cookbook: Over 150 Tasty and Nutritious Recipes for People Who Have Difficulty Swallowing](#) (Paperback) By Donna L. Weihofen, MS, RD et al.
- Two books available at www.dinnerthroughastraw.net for people with difficulty chewing and swallowing: *Dinner through a Straw* and *Let's Do Lunch*
- www.enjoyyourcooking.com/tag/soft-food

References, Websites, and Resources:

1. Zemanova M, Novak F, Vitek P, Pazdro A, Smejkal M, Pazdrova G, Petruzalka L. Outcomes of patients with oesophageal cancer treated with preoperative chemoradiotherapy, followed by tumor resection: influence of nutritional factors. J BUON. 2012 Apr-Jun; 17(2):310-6.

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2. Garth AK, Newsome CM, Simmance N, Crowe TC. Nutritional status, nutrition practices and post-operative complications in patients with gastrointestinal cancer. J Hum Nutr Diet. 2010 Aug; 23(4):393-401.

The original question and answer were generously donated by Diana Dyer, MS, RD a cancer survivor, registered dietitian, organic garlic farmer, and the author of "A Dietitian's Cancer Story: Information & Inspiration for Recovery & Healing from a 3-time Cancer Survivor."

Question and Answer updated by Jyoti Benjamin, MS, RD, CSO, FAND, CD, on behalf of the ON DPG.