

IMPROVING YOUR NUTRITION

During and After COVID-19 Illness

COVID-19 (coronavirus disease-2019) is an infectious disease, which can cause symptoms of fever, coughing, general weakness, pain, difficulty breathing as well as changes to taste and smell. Your diet, nutritional and fluid intake are very important when you have COVID-19, but the symptoms can affect your appetite and ability to eat, making it difficult for you to meet your nutritional needs.

If you are struggling to eat enough, or if you are losing weight or strength in your muscles, you may need to think differently about the foods you are eating. This leaflet provides important tips to help you get the most out of the foods you eat while you are unwell and may help you to regain some of the weight or strength you have lost.

It is important to be aware of your weight and appetite, particularly if you are older or have a pre-existing medical condition. If you are worried about the fact you are losing weight without trying the information in this leaflet should help you, however if you continue to lose weight or you struggle to eat enough, even if you are overweight, seek advice from a healthcare professional.

Tips for Monitoring Your Progress

- If you can, keep an eye on your weight as it is an indicator of what is happening in your body
- You can check to see if you are losing too much weight by using the self-screening tool at <https://www.malnutritionselfscreening.org>
- If you are unable to weigh yourself, be aware of other signs of weight loss (for example jewellery and clothes becoming looser) and use the checklist from the Patients Association at <https://www.patients-association.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=3449fca0-dc52-4f06-ac75-3050b71d7bb5>
- Weight isn't the only measure of your progress so consider what is important to you and normal for you. This is likely to be different for us all. For some it might be climbing the stairs or being able to get up out of a chair with ease, for others it might be having the energy to go for a walk

Tips for a Balanced Diet

A balanced diet includes:

- Protein Foods (see page 2) - for healthy muscles, organs and the immune system
Examples include meat, fish, eggs, beans, pulses and tofu
- Carbohydrate Foods - for energy and fibre
Examples include potatoes, bread, pasta, rice, cereals and puddings
- Fruits and Vegetables - for fibre, vitamins and minerals to support the immune system
Fresh, frozen or canned fruit and vegetables all count. Think about using in pies, crumbles or trifles
- Dairy foods - for calcium and other important minerals for healthy bones and teeth
Examples include milk, yogurt, cheese, cream and fromage frais
- Fluid - for good hydration
Check your urine colour. Dark urine is a sign of dehydration. Aim to drink enough fluid to keep urine a pale straw colour. All fluid counts (except alcohol). Include nourishing fluids such as milky drinks or juices

If you are unwell, if you are struggling to eat enough, or if you are losing weight or strength in your muscles, you may need to eat more of certain foods to help prevent further weight loss. The tips on the following pages may help you to get the most from your foods.

Tips for Getting Enough Protein

Protein is particularly important for building your strength after a severe illness.

- Try to include a protein source (such as meat, fish, eggs, beans, pulses, nuts or tofu) at each meal
- Visit <https://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/proteinideas.pdf> for more information about including enough protein in your diet
- If you are finding it difficult to consume enough protein in your diet talk to your healthcare professional about adding additional protein to your diet: this may include the use of oral nutritional supplements (nutrition drinks with a high protein content)

Tips about Vitamins and Minerals

Vitamins and minerals are important to support your immune system during illness. If you are struggling to eat enough, you may not be getting enough vitamins and minerals. During isolation at home, you may not get enough sunshine for your body to produce vitamin D.

- Try to include fruit and vegetables in your diet (aim for at least 5 portions a day)
- Consider a multivitamin and mineral supplement if you are struggling with your fruit and vegetable intake
- Spend some time outdoors each day if you can and consider taking a vitamin D supplement whilst you are self-isolating at home. In the UK a supplement of 10 micrograms of vitamin D a day is recommended

Tips for Eating When You are Short of Breath

Eating can be very challenging when you are short of breath so try to:

- Eat smaller portions of energy and protein rich foods more frequently throughout the day
- Choose softer, moist foods that are easier to chew and swallow
- Take your time during eating

Tips for Managing a Dry Mouth

Dry mouth can be caused by the use of nebulisers, inhalers and oxygen therapy. It can make it difficult to chew and swallow foods, and sometimes can lead to taste changes.

- Try to drink six to eight cups of fluid each day (including nourishing fluids such as milky drinks or juices)
- Add sauces such as gravy, mayonnaise, salad cream and cheese sauce to foods, and choose moist dishes like stews
- Suck sugar-free sweets or chew sugar-free gum to help saliva production
- Rinse and gargle with water after using an inhaler to keep your mouth fresh

If you are finding it difficult to swallow, are frequently coughing during meals or your voice becomes gargly, ask your healthcare professional to refer you to a speech and language therapist to check your swallowing and for further advice.

Tips for Managing Changes to Taste and Smell

Changes to your taste and smell are common symptoms of COVID-19 and can make eating and drinking less enjoyable.

- Experiment with herbs, spices, pepper, chutneys and pickles in cooking
- If you are struggling with the strong taste of hot foods, try cold foods instead
- If you go off a particular food, try it again regularly as your tastes may continue to change

Tips for Making the Most of Your Food

Eating well when you've lost your appetite can be difficult; you could try some of the ideas listed here:

- Eat more of the foods that you enjoy at the times of day when you feel more like eating
- Eat smaller meals with snacks and nourishing drinks (e.g. smoothies, soups, fruit juice, milkshakes or hot chocolate) in between
- Avoid drinking before or during meals, as the liquid can fill you up
- Add ingredients such as cream, cheese, butter, olive oil, cream cheese, milk powder and ground almonds to foods like soups, stews, curries, scrambled eggs, vegetables, potatoes
- Add honey, syrup and jams to porridge, milky puddings, on bread, toast or tea cakes
- Fortify your usual milk by whisking 2-4 tablespoons of skimmed milk powder into 1 pint of milk
- If you usually use low fat, low sugar 'diet' foods and drinks, switch to the non-diet ones (e.g. whole milk) and have some treats such as a piece of cake, chocolate, a handful of nuts, a biscuit between meals or as a snack
- Powdered nutritional supplement drinks are available from most supermarkets and pharmacies as well as online, and can be used between meals to help you to get the extra nutrition you need whilst you are feeling unwell

The free leaflet 'Your Guide to Making the Most of Your Food' contains more tips and ideas to help you get the most nutrition from your food: https://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/leaflet_yellow.pdf

If you have diabetes or heart disease, some of the tips above may not be suitable for you. Speak to your healthcare professional for further advice.

Tips for Getting the Foods You Need

Social distancing, isolation and feeling unwell can make it difficult to go shopping for the foods you need.

- Include convenience foods (such as tinned, dried or frozen foods) in your weekly shop as these will last longer e.g. long-life milk, savoury snacks, plain biscuits, rice puddings, corned beef, baked beans, soups, tinned puddings and custard. Useful store cupboard ideas can be found at <https://www.bda.uk.com/uploads/assets/275073a5-06cc-473fb-349ca768124e72f/200406-BDA-OPSG-Store-cupboard-Flier-V2-A4-version.pdf>
- Use meals on wheels services or home delivery services offering pre-prepared meals
- Arrange to eat regularly with a friend or family member using video calls
- If you are self-isolating ask family, friends or your carer for help with your shopping, or ordering food for home delivery
- Ask family, friends or your carer for support with technology to be able to connect via social media, phone or video calls
- If you are struggling ask to be assessed for a package of care (contact your local social services department)
- People with certain medical conditions may be considered as extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 and eligible for priority supermarket deliveries. Visit <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable> for more information about how to register as a vulnerable person

Tips for Physical Activity

Activity combined with good nutrition can help you get back to your normal routine. Activity is an important part of recovery from illness to help strengthen your lungs, make breathing easier and keep you stronger. Activity does not have to be strenuous – gentle exercise such as walking around the garden or exercises in the home can all help. There are lots of activity programmes online.

If you have been given specific advice to help you to recover from your illness, continue to follow this. This may include tailored physical exercise and information that will help you to better understand and manage your health condition/s and symptoms.

Considerations for Special Diets

If you have a health condition such as diabetes or heart disease some of the dietary advice in this leaflet may be less suitable for you.

- If you have diabetes, infections such as COVID-19 may affect your blood glucose control. Visit https://www.diabetes.org.uk/about_us/news/coronavirus for information about diabetes and COVID-19
- If you are on medicines for high blood pressure, and have lost a lot of weight as a result of COVID-19, this might affect your blood pressure control

If you need further advice please contact your specialist nurse or healthcare team.

Oral Nutritional Supplements

If you have recently been discharged from hospital, you are struggling to manage to eat enough and/or if you are thin or feeling weak your healthcare professional may feel that you need extra nutrition to meet your energy and nutrient needs and may prescribe nutrition drinks called 'oral nutritional supplements'. You may only need oral nutritional supplements for a short time for example until you are able to eat enough to meet your needs. More information about these is available at <https://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/covid19red.pdf>

Further Information

British Dietetic Association - COVID-19 / Coronavirus - Advice for the General Public

<https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/covid-19-corona-virus-advice-for-the-general-public.html>

Please note - the information in this leaflet should not replace any individual advice given to you by a qualified healthcare professional.



June 2020 - updated May 2023 - to be reviewed May 2024

This information has been compiled by a multi-professional panel (see www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/about-us), it is largely derived from the Managing Malnutrition in COPD and Managing Malnutrition in the Community patient materials and takes into account what we know about patients with COVID-19 to date.

Costs of the production of this leaflet were met by an unrestricted educational grant from Nutricia Advanced Medical Nutrition

Copyright: Managing Adult Malnutrition in the Community (www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk)

www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/covid-19