

# NUTRITION SUPPORT

## During and After COVID-19 Illness

### Advice for Adult Patients and Carers

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. These symptoms can affect your appetite and ability to eat, making it difficult for you to meet your nutritional needs. Over time, this can lead to a condition called malnutrition (undernutrition), which can slow down your recovery.

**If you are struggling to eat enough, if you have been very ill and/or if you have been recently discharged from hospital, your healthcare professional may have given you advice about a nourishing diet and you may have been given a supply of nutrition drinks, known as 'oral nutritional supplements'.**

In addition, if you are over the age of 65 years, or you have a long-term health condition, and have symptoms of COVID-19 you may be at increased risk of malnutrition.

This leaflet gives advice on how to get the most from your food as well as how to incorporate the nutritional supplements into your diet (see page 4).

Losing weight without meaning to can be a sign of malnutrition, even if you are overweight. 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 that you are losing weight unintentionally 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 at risk of malnutrition (undernutrition) 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-ac753050b71d7bb5>
- Weight isn't the only measure of your progress so consider what is important to 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 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 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: [www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/leaflets-patients-and-carers](http://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/leaflets-patients-and-carers)

*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 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 short term use of an oral nutritional supplement (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 with your appetite, 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. Consider taking a vitamin D supplement particularly if you are self-isolating at home. In the UK a supplement of 10 micrograms of vitamin D a day is recommended

## 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 routines. 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](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

Oral nutritional supplements are specially made to contain energy, protein, vitamins and minerals to help people who are finding it difficult to eat enough to get the nutrition they need. They can help you to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. They may also help you to recover from illness. You may have been discharged from hospital on oral nutritional supplements or you may need to be prescribed them during your recovery at home.

### Types of Oral Nutritional Supplements

- Oral Nutritional Supplements are available in a range of types and flavours (milkshakes, puddings, juice, yoghurt or soup styles). Some are ready-made and ready to drink, whereas others are powders that need to be made up with fresh milk. Discuss your preferences with your GP, Pharmacist or Dietitian and find one you enjoy taking. Starter variety packs are available to try to help you decide your preferred flavours
- Some oral nutritional supplements contain more of certain nutrients, which may be helpful for some people recovering from illness. Those that are high in energy and protein may be particularly helpful to rebuild your strength if you have been very unwell and/or if you have lost weight. They are also helpful if you are frail or if you have a long-term health condition such as cancer or COPD
- Some oral nutritional supplements are available in a smaller bottle which may be easier to manage if you are breathless, have a poor appetite or struggle to eat or drink large amounts
- If you are finding it difficult to swallow, your GP can prescribe thickened oral nutritional supplements to help you

### How to Take Oral Nutritional Supplements

- Your GP or Dietitian will tell you how many to take each day – prescriptions are often between 1 and 3 oral nutritional supplements per day. It is important that you take the recommended number/ dose each day but if you have trouble managing the amount recommended do let your healthcare professional know. Your healthcare professional should check in with you regularly to see how you are getting on with your eating and drinking and your prescribed ONS
- Oral nutritional supplements should be taken in addition to your meals and snacks - they should not replace food, drinks or meals (unless a healthcare professional has advised this)
- In general, people take oral nutritional supplements when they most feel like taking them. This could be between meals, like a snack, first thing in the morning or before bed-time. Others find that taking small amounts of their supplements regularly throughout the day helps
- Most oral nutritional supplements (drinks and desserts) taste best cold. Soup and savoury styles are better warm
- You can drink most liquid oral nutritional supplements straight from the bottle using a straw if provided or you can pour it into a glass or cup. Oral nutritional supplements can also be frozen as ice-lollies or be included in recipes such as hot chocolate, porridge, custard and rice pudding

### How Long to Take Oral Nutritional Supplements for

Typically you should only need a prescription of oral nutritional supplements for up to 12 weeks. Your healthcare professional will review and monitor you to decide when you no longer need the extra nutrition.

### How to Store Oral Nutritional Supplements

If they are unopened, oral nutritional supplements can be stored in a cupboard out of direct sunlight. Once opened they should be stored in the fridge – check the label for instructions to see how long they can be safely stored in the fridge after opening. Remember to shake them well before opening.

**Please speak to your healthcare professional if you have further questions about your oral nutritional supplements.**

#### More Information

More advice on oral nutritional supplements can be found in the free leaflet 'Nutrition Drinks – Advice for patients and carers' available at [https://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/leaflet\\_red.pdf](https://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/library/leaflet_red.pdf)

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



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[www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/covid-19](http://www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/covid-19)

This information has been compiled by a multi-professional panel (see [www.malnutritionpathway.co.uk/about-us](http://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. It is relevant for use in the UK. Costs of the production of this leaflet were met by an unrestricted educational grant from Nutricia Advanced Medical Nutrition

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