

Overcoming Malnutrition

Medical nutrition therapy provided by a registered dietitian reduces the risk of malnutrition and improves outcomes during cancer treatment.

March 14, 2022 By Karolina Starczak, RDN

What if one commonly overlooked component of cancer care could speed up recovery, improve treatment tolerance, reduce side effects, lower the risk of infection and decrease hospitalizations?

That component is nutrition.

When you have cancer, it can be difficult to maintain your nutritional status. Up to 80% of patients will become malnourished at some point in their cancer journey. Malnutrition is triggered by the complex interaction between reduced food intake, increased energy expenditure from metabolic changes, systemic inflammation, tumor growth and treatment.

Simply put, the body burns fuel more rapidly but struggles to take in enough micro- and macronutrients, resulting in a deficit that, in turn, causes us to tap into our energy savings by breaking down fat and muscle.

To make matters more challenging, it's common for patients with cancer to need more calories to sustain their body weight and nutrition status than they did prior to their cancer diagnosis. It is estimated that 20% to 30% of deaths in patients with cancer are due to malnutrition and not the cancer itself.

Luckily, there is an answer. Medical nutrition therapy provided by a registered dietitian has been shown to reduce the risk of malnutrition and improve outcomes during cancer treatment. Nutrition intervention may include dietary counseling, oral nutrition supplements and, if necessary, enteral nutrition (via a tube to the stomach) or parenteral nutrition (intravenous or via a port). These interventions improve weight, energy intake and quality of life.

Yet access to nutrition care during cancer treatment is sparse. Over 75% of cancer centers do not have a registered dietitian on staff, and only about half monitor the nutrition status of patients with cancer. The focus during cancer treatment is shifted toward medical regimens, and it can be easy to forget the simple fact that our bodies need nourishment to survive.

Cancer treatment can be overwhelming. Taking action to improve your nutrition can help ease the journey and may improve both your outcome and quality of life.

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5 Nutrition Questions

Here are some helpful questions about nutrition to ask your care team at your next visit.

1. Is there a registered dietitian on staff who can provide me with support and guidance? If not, is there one outside the center you could recommend who specializes in cancer?
2. During my treatment, how will we monitor and correct my nutrition status and/or unintentional weight loss?
3. How can I manage common treatment side effects, such as loss of appetite, dry mouth and diarrhea, that could make it more difficult for me to get adequate nutrition?
4. Should I implement any dietary restrictions or modifications during my treatment?
5. What are the warning signs of malnutrition?

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