

Dietary advice for people with head and neck cancer

This leaflet gives you advice to maintain a nourishing diet during and after your cancer treatment, as well as meal ideas.

Your dietitian: _____

Tel: 0118 322 7116 or Email: rbb-tr.dietitians@nhs.net

Why do I need dietary advice?

During your radiotherapy treatment, your mouth may become inflamed and sore making eating difficult. You may also experience loss of taste and thick secretions further contributing to this. These symptoms are likely to start from the end of week two of treatment and may continue for some weeks after the treatment finishes. Despite this, it is important to keep weight loss to a minimum throughout to ensure your radiotherapy mask is fitting well, and treatment can be as effective as possible.

What diet should I follow during treatment?

- ✓ As your throat becomes drier and more painful, avoid acidic foods such as citrus fruits, tomatoes and tomato-based sauces.
- ✓ Avoid alcohol and coffee.
- ✓ Avoid dry, rough or tough foods.
- ✓ Choose softer options, with creamy sauces or gravies.
- ✓ Towards the end of treatment, you may need to follow a diet of liquids only – milk, milkshakes, smoothies, creamy soups, milky puddings.
- ✓ To keep your mouth and teeth clean, rinse your mouth after eating / drinking

How do I eat enough calories during treatment?

- ✓ Eat a diet high in protein and energy (calories) during and in the early weeks after your radiotherapy.
- ✓ Use full fat, high calorie foods (avoid low calorie / low fat / diet products).
- ✓ Aim to have five small meals / snacks per day.
- ✓ We may recommend you take nutritional supplement drinks. These are usually a milkshake style drink, fortified to be high in calories, protein and vitamins.
- ✓ We may recommend you have a feeding tube put in your stomach (a 'PEG') ahead of your treatment. Usually, we can predict which treatments are going to cause the most issues with eating and drinking, and our recommendation will be based upon this.
- ✓ Keep on top of your recommended pain relief during treatment, to allow you to keep eating for as long as possible.

Meal ideas

Breakfast

- ✓ Porridge or Ready Brek, made with full fat milk.
- ✓ Breakfast cereal soaked in full fat milk.
- ✓ Smoothie (avoid acidic fruits) made with full fat milk / yoghurt. Add in nut butters, or ground nuts for additional calories and protein.

Lunch:

- ✓ Scrambled egg made with butter, cheese, double cream.
- ✓ Omelette.
- ✓ Creamy soups – bread can be difficult to swallow, brioche with plenty of spread and dipped in soup may be easier.
- ✓ Jacket potato (inside only) with tuna or egg mayonnaise.
- ✓ Mashed potato with full fat milk, butter and cheese.
- ✓ Smooth meat/fish pate mixed into cream cheese or yoghurt.

Evening meal:

- ✓ Soft cooked, creamy pastas e.g. carbonara, macaroni cheese.
- ✓ Poached fish in butter or parsley sauce.
- ✓ Casseroles.
- ✓ Cauliflower or broccoli cheese.
- ✓ Shepherds or cottage pie.
- ✓ Soft cooked noodles or risotto.

Snacks:

- ✓ Milky puddings – custard, rice pudding, semolina, crème caramel, mousses.
- ✓ Ice cream.
- ✓ Trifles.
- ✓ Avocado or houmous dips.
- ✓ Soft cheese.
- ✓ Soft tinned or fresh fruits (avoiding citrus such as orange and pineapple) with cream.

Nourishing drinks:

- ✓ Fortified milk: 1 pint of whole milk mixed with 4 tablespoons of milk powder. Keep in the fridge and use in coffee/tea/hot chocolate or on cereal.
- ✓ Milkshakes: 250mls full fat milk, 3 tablespoons milk powder, 4 teaspoons milkshake powder mixed together.
- ✓ Add soaked oats or Weetabix to the above and blend for a breakfast drink

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Produced by Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust Dietitians, August 2023

Reviewed: September 2025

Next review due: September 2027