



# Eating well in hospital

Dietary advice during a  
hospital stay and afterwards

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**This advice gives tips on improving appetite and food intake. There are other dietary advice leaflets that you may find useful at home – please discuss with your clinical team if you would like more information.**

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## Why is it important to eat well in hospital?

When you are unwell it is common to 'lose' your appetite and not to eat as much as usual. During illness, you may need to eat more and it may be difficult to eat enough to meet your need for energy, protein, fat, vitamins and minerals. You may lose weight and this can lead to delays in recovery. If you are not eating well, you are more likely to be at risk of malnutrition (weakness/poor health due to a lack of nutritious food), which can cause:

- Longer hospital stays.
- Increased risk of illness, infection and slower wound healing.
- Increased nausea and constipation.
- Increased risk of falls.
- Low mood and reduced quality of life.
- Reduced energy, reduced muscle strength and inability to carry out daily activities.

## What are the symptoms of malnutrition?

You may be malnourished if you have any of the following:

- Unplanned weight loss – which can cause clothes, dentures, belts or jewellery to become loose.
- Tiredness and lack of energy.
- Lack of interest in food and/or drink.
- Loss of muscle strength.

## Tips to help improve your appetite in hospital

Although you may not feel like eating, appetite is often stimulated by eating, so you might find the following advice useful:

- **Eat 'little and often'** – try a small snack between meals and a dessert after lunch and evening meal.

- **Get comfortable before eating** – sit upright or in a chair.
- Maintain **good oral hygiene** – clean your teeth twice a day.
- **Avoid filling up on drinks just before or during meals** to avoid feeling too full to eat.
- **Special drinks like nutritional supplements (Ensure or Fortisip)** are an easy way to get extra energy, protein, vitamins and minerals and can be drunk between meals. They are available on the ward in different flavours – just ask ward staff. You can also mix them with milk, juice or water.
- **Include a dessert after your main meal** – such as sponge or crumble with custard, rice or semolina pudding, yoghurt, ice cream, cheese and biscuits.
- Let your nurse know if you have any **swallowing difficulties**.
- **Visit the hospital restaurant** to get more food options
- Aim to have **nourishing drinks** such as milk, hot chocolate and fruit juice throughout the day.
- **Avoid soups** as they fill you up but have poor calorific/protein value.
- If you suffer from nausea or vomiting, it is best to order plain foods, e.g. toast, jacket potatoes, rice or mashed potato,

## What meals are available in hospital?

- You can request a cooked breakfast – please ask the ward-staff to provide a meal voucher. Please note that for food safety reasons, patients will not be served eggs.
- Snack boxes and hot meals are available if you miss a meal.
- **Ask for an alternative menu list** (hot and cold main meals, puddings and finger foods) if you are unable to choose a meal that you can manage from the main menu.
- Vegan, vegetarian, Halal, Kosher, Afro-Caribbean menus are available for all.
- Don't be afraid to ask for a nourishing drink, or if snacks are available. The following are available to be ordered directly from catering, so please add to your menu when choosing your food:

- Ambrosia rice pudding or custard pot
- Muffins – lemon or chocolate flavour
- Full fat yoghurt
- Dairylea cheese triangles or cheese and biscuits
- Biscuits and individual cakes are listed on the patient menu card.
- The following are also available on the ward: toast or bread / honey / Marmite / butter or margarine / jam or marmalade / biscuits / cream crackers / whole milk / hot chocolate / cereals / porridge (Ready Brek).
- Please ask ward staff if you want a nourishing drink.
- If you are struggling to find food that is familiar, or you would enjoy please ask to speak to the catering department who will be able to explore all of the available options with you.
- If you would like to provide feedback on the food, please ask to speak to a member of the catering staff.

## What food can I bring in from home?

Relatives can **bring in your favourite foods** as long as they don't need to be refrigerated and can be kept safely at room temperature. While you are unwell, you are more vulnerable to infections such as food poisoning. In hospital, the temperature of food is strictly controlled so that bacteria cannot thrive and it is safe to eat. For food brought in from home, temperature is also very important. Hot food cools quickly and is at risk from bacteria, like Salmonella. Cold foods can get too warm very quickly on the ward so can also cause problems. Listeriosis is a rare infection, usually caused by eating food contaminated with listeria bacteria. It can pose a risk to vulnerable individuals, such as cancer patients, pregnant women, people with diabetes and patients with suppressed immune systems. Listeria can contaminate a wide range of foods, but most infections are caused by eating chilled, ready-to-eat foods, such as pre-packaged sandwiches.