
Dietary advice for patients undergoing treatment for head and neck cancers

Head and Neck

Patient Information



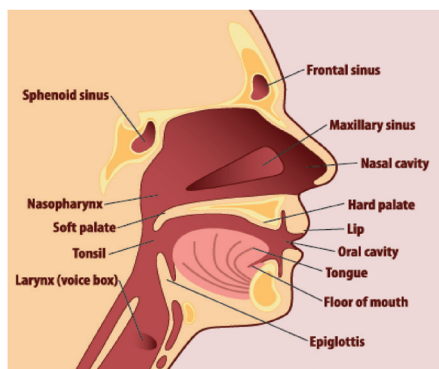
Introduction

During treatment for cancer of the head and neck, eating and drinking can become more difficult than usual.

The side effects that you experience will be individual to you and will depend on the position of your cancer and the treatments you receive (your doctor will discuss your treatment and likely side effects with you). It may help to write down any questions you have as there can be lots of information to take in.

Despite the side effects that you may experience, it is important that you continue to eat and drink throughout your treatment. This will help you to tolerate your treatment and heal faster afterwards.

The information in this booklet will provide you with some hints and ideas for eating and drinking during and after treatment.



Tips for maintaining a good food intake

- Eating little and often may be more manageable – aim to consume five to six small meals or snacks throughout the day.
- Ensure that you take any analgesia (pain killers) recommended by your doctor 30 minutes before attempting to eat or drink.
- Keeping your mouth and teeth clean is very important. Follow the mouth care routine recommended by your dentist/

dental hygienist, using a soft toothbrush with fluoride tooth paste and mouthwash.

- Make the most of everything you do eat by choosing foods and drinks high in protein and energy.
- Maximising the energy content of your meals will help you to maintain your weight during treatment:
 - Try adding extra butter, cream, cheese, salad dressings or olive oil to savoury foods.
 - Add sugar, honey, jam, custard, cream or ice cream to sweet dishes.
- If you are feeling too tired to cook, choose ready made meals, accept help from friends and relatives when offered and try to keep a selection of foods that do not need preparation.
- It is important to maintain your fluid intake throughout your treatment to avoid dehydration, aim for 8-10 cups a day.
- Smoking during treatment can worsen your symptom, - talk to your doctor if you currently smoke and need help or support to give up.

What can I do if my mouth is sore?

During chemotherapy and radiotherapy, ulcers may develop inside your mouth. The following may help to make eating and drinking a little easier during this time:

- Always take any mouthwashes and pain killers as directed by your doctor before you eat.
- Alcohol, particularly spirits can irritate your mouth and should be avoided.
- Be cautious with foods which are spicy, salty or acidic (citrus fruits) as you may find these foods aggravate your mouth.
- Warm foods may be easier than very hot foods so allow hot meals to cool down before eating. Some people find ice cream or ice lollies soothing for a sore mouth.

- Soft and moist foods, such as yoghurt and porridge can be easier to eat than hard, dry or rough foods such as toast, biscuits and crisps.
- Cold drinks such as milkshakes and drinks with added ice can be soothing for a sore mouth.

For further support and advice on appropriate medications and mouthwashes, please speak to your doctor or clinical nurse specialist.

Why is my mouth dry and what can I do about it?

We have several saliva glands in the head and neck area. If some or all of these glands are within your radiotherapy treatment field, you will produce less saliva and so your mouth will become dry. Radiotherapy treatment will also remove the water content of your saliva, leaving sticky, thick secretions. Following treatment, it can take several weeks or months for saliva production to return to normal and occasionally it will never return.

Saliva is important for keeping our mouths clean and comfortable; it is also used for taste and swallowing. If loss of saliva is a problem for you, ask your doctor who may be able to recommend some saliva substitutes to help.

- Take regular sips of fluids throughout the day. Take a bottle of water or fizzy drink with you when you are out to keep your mouth moist.
- Sugar free chewing gum may help to stimulate saliva production.
- Add extra sauces to meals and choose foods that are already moist. such as casseroles, fish in sauce, pasta or noodles with plenty of sauce or puddings with custard or cream.
- Ice cubes or ice lollies can help moisten your mouth.
- Sip fluids between each mouthful to help wash food down.
- Avoid very dry foods such as crackers, toast or crisps.

What can I do if food tastes different?

During treatment for head and neck cancers, taste can be altered. This may mean that food tastes wrong, for example, sweet foods may taste salty, red meat may taste metallic or food may taste very bland rather like cardboard. These changes may be related to medications, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy. They are usually temporary.

- Avoid those foods that taste different but remember to try them again in a few weeks.
- If sweet foods taste best, eat more of these. If you can, have two puddings rather than a main course.
- Try to find acceptable alternatives to foods that taste different; for example, if red meat tastes metallic have chicken, fish, eggs or cheese instead to keep the balance of your diet.
- If tea and coffee taste wrong, keep your fluid intake up by trying fruit teas, squashes, milkshakes or smoothies.

Soft diet ideas

During treatment it can become difficult to continue eating due to soreness of the mouth and throat or due to swallowing difficulties caused by either the treatment or the cancer itself. It may therefore be necessary to change the consistency of your diet to either a soft or puree diet.

If you are coughing while eating or drinking and / or have a feeling of food lodging in the throat, please discuss this with your doctor who may refer you to a Speech and Language Therapist for further help.

Remember that many foods are already soft and so will not need any additional preparation so make the most of these to provide a varied diet. Other foods will become soft if you add a sauce or mash the food so you may still be able to enjoy many of your usual meals.

Soft breakfast ideas

- Porridge made with plenty of full cream milk and sugar or honey.
- Cereals served with hot milk such as Weetabix, Cornflakes, Rice Krispies.
- Custard style, Greek or full fat yoghurts or fromage frais.
- Soft fruits such as banana, pear or stewed fruit.
- Fruit smoothies made with yoghurt or ice cream. Can also be bought ready made.
- Scrambled eggs or boiled eggs.
- Pancakes with butter, honey or syrup.

Ideas for soft meals

Meat and poultry

- Shepherds pie, cottage pie, corned beef hash, meat loaf, moussaka, mild chilli con carne.
- Tender stews, casseroles and hot pots .
- Slow cooked curries, add coconut milk to cool down if your mouth is sore.
- Sausages without skin served with plenty of gravy.

Fish

- Fisherman's pie, fish cakes.
- Fish poached in sauce such as parsley sauce, hollandaise sauce, cheese sauce or boil in the bag fish.

Pasta and rice dishes

- Lasagne, Spaghetti bolognese with grated cheese.
- Soft pasta in sauce such as macaroni cheese, spaghetti carbonara.
- Rice and peas, risotto, khichdi, mild biryani.
- Gnocchi served with pesto, creamy sauces.
- Soft noodles.
- Cous cous.

Eggs

- Cheese Omelettes.
- Egg mayonnaise.
- Scrambled eggs.

Vegetarian dishes

- Cheese and potato pie, bubble and squeak.
- Cauliflower cheese.
- Stir fried vegetables with tofu.
- Jacket potato (leave the skin) with sour cream, cheese, baked beans.
- Dahl.
- Houmous, tahini.

Ideas for soft puddings

- Sponge pudding with custard, cream or ice cream
- Milk puddings, for example, rice pudding, semolina, tapioca
- Stewed fruit with custard or cream
- Banana custard
- Fruit fool, mousse, instant whip, jelly, crème caramel, blancmange, jelly foam (jelly mixed with cream or evaporated milk and set)
- Trifle
- Full fat yoghurts, Greek yoghurts, fromage frais
- Biscuits dunked in hot drinks
- Ice cream
- Hot chocolate with cream
- Milk shakes with added ice-cream

Purée meal ideas

If a soft diet becomes too sore or too difficult to swallow you may need to purée or blend your food instead. Many every day foods can be liquidised to a thin, even consistency to make it easier for you to tolerate.

Ways to add calories to purée meals

Meat and Poultry	Add sauces and gravies. Condensed soups can make a good base.
Fish	Blend with sauces such as parsley, cheese or white sauce.
Eggs	Add cheese and butter before cooking scrambled eggs. Always cook thoroughly.
Soups	Add dried milk powder to full cream milk before making up condensed or packet soups.
Vegetables	Blend with butter or cheese sauce.
Puddings	Add extra cream or evaporated milk to milk puddings before blending.

How to purée your food

You will need to use a blender or food processor. If you are thinking of buying one there are a wide variety available including hand held blenders and those for baby food.

Try and make the food smooth in texture as small pieces or 'bits' may be difficult to manage. You may find a sieve helpful for this.

Purée different foods separately such as vegetables and pasta, to make it look more attractive.

Foods that are already soft and moist or with sauce will liquidise to a smoother consistency than dry ones such as casseroles, shepherds pie, fish in sauce, bean hotpot, pasta in sauce, curry or dahl, mixed vegetables cooked in butter and cream.

To liquidise food you need to add liquid. It is advisable to use liquids that increase the nutritional content. Such as:

- Full fat or fortified milk.
- Cream such as double or whipping.
- Cheese sauce.
- Rich gravy - add extra fat such as dripping.
- Homemade or ready made pasta sauces.
- Neutral liquid supplementary drinks.

What happens if I am unable to eat and drink sufficiently?

If you start to lose weight despite making basic changes to your diet you may be advised to take some nutritional supplements. These come in a variety of forms and are all high in energy to help maintain your weight while you are unable to eat well.

Nutritionally complete or supplementary drinks are available on prescription; examples include Fortisip, Ensure Plus and Fresubin Energy.

Supplement drinks come in a variety of styles and flavours, your dietitian will advise which to try and when to use them. Sometimes you will need to try a few before finding the combination that suits you best. Recipes and additional ideas on how to take them can also be provided by your dietitian.

Glucose polymer powders such as Maxijul or Polycose are high energy, tasteless powders that dissolve easily in food and drink. They are available on prescription and your dietitian can advise how much to take.

- Add three heaped tablespoons of powder to 550ml (1 pint) of water. Use for fruit squashes, gravies, soups or jellies.
- Add three heaped tablespoons to 550ml (1 pint) of full cream milk and use as normal milk.
- Add three heaped teaspoons to all hot and cold drinks.
- Add two tablespoons of powder to puddings and cereals.
- Add two teaspoons of powder to savoury soups, sauces and soft foods such as baked beans or mashed potato.

Other supplements commonly used include:

- Calogen or ProCal Shot high energy, small volume supplements - these can be taken on their own or added to milkshakes, milk puddings, creamy soups and sauces.
- Unflavoured Scandishake, Calshake, Enshake or polycal powder can be added to milk or savoury dishes such as soups or creamy sauces to add extra protein and energy.

- Your dietitian will discuss this in further detail should you need them.

Other forms of nutritional support

If at any time during or after your treatment you become unable to continue to eat and drink or if you are unable to take enough to maintain your weight you may be advised to have a feeding tube inserted to ensure you are able to take in sufficient food and fluids.

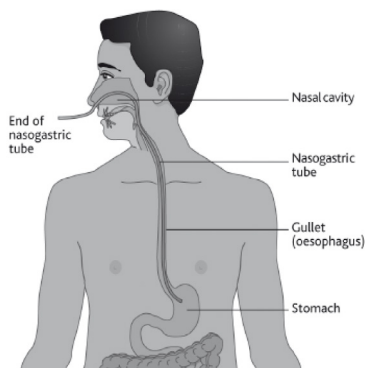
If you have surgery before a course of radiotherapy or chemotherapy a feeding tube may be inserted during your operation to enable you to maintain your weight both after your surgery and during further treatment.

How are feeding tubes inserted?

There are a number of different feeding tubes available and your doctor or dietitian will discuss with you the most suitable one for you.

Nasogastric tube

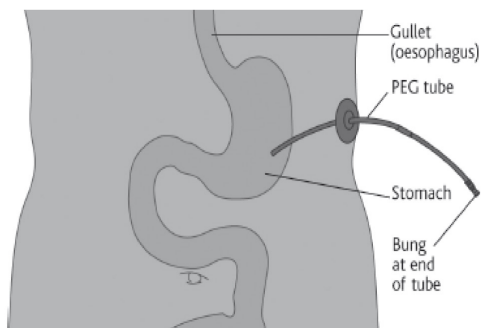
Nasogastric (NG) tubes are temporary tubes that are usually used for short term feeding, for example two to four weeks. These tubes can be inserted in clinic or on the ward and you will not usually need any anaesthetic or sedation. The NG tube is passed by a doctor or nurse in through your nose and down into your stomach. The placement of your tube will be confirmed by checking the pH. You will need to be taught how to check the position of the tube on a daily basis and how to put feed through the tube. As the tube is temporary it can be removed as soon as you are able to eat and drink adequately.



The tube will not stop you from eating and drinking and you should continue to eat if it is safe for you to do so. Discuss this with your doctor or speech and language therapist if you are unsure.

Gastrostomy tube

Gastrostomy tubes are another type of feeding tube that is inserted either in endoscopy (a PEG tube) or in radiology (a RIG tube). These tubes are inserted directly into your stomach with an opening or stoma onto the surface of the skin. Once inserted the tube can be kept in place for long periods of time and can be hidden under clothing making these tubes ideal if



you are likely to need supplementary feeds for more than four weeks. It is very important to care for your gastrostomy tube to help it last longer and to prevent infections. Following insertion of the tube you will be given information on how to clean the area around the stoma and the tube itself, if you are unsure of this please ask your nurse or dietitian.

How is food given through a feeding tube?

Once you feel confident about having the feeding tube, you will be taught how to use any equipment needed before you leave hospital. If necessary, extra help can be provided at home to manage your feeds until you are able to do so yourself. A liquid feed very similar to the supplement drinks is given each day through the tube. The feed will provide you with everything you need although it is sometimes necessary to give extra water if you are not able to drink normally. These feeds can be delivered to you by a specialist company directly to your door. The exact way the feed is given will largely depend on what you find easiest, some people prefer to use a simple pump to give feeds

overnight while they are sleeping so they are free during the day; while others prefer to have several smaller feeds during the day very much like your usual meal and snack routine. Your dietitian will discuss the different options with you so you can find the best way of managing your feeds for you.

Department contact details

Chelsea 020 7808 2814

Sutton 020 8661 3066

Dietitian
Date

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899

You can ring the hotline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Call us straight away if you are feeling unwell or are worried about the side effects of cancer treatments.

This service provides specialist advice and support to all Royal Marsden patients, as well as to their carers, and both hospital and community-based doctors and nurses caring for Royal Marsden patients.

For further information

Macmillan Cancer Support

<http://be.macmillan.org.uk/Downloads/CancerInformation/LivingWithAndAfterCancer/MAC14270Managing-the-late-effects-of-head-and-neck-cancer-treatmentE02lowrespdf20160901.pdf>

PINNT- A support group for people receiving artificial nutrition

<http://pinnt.com/home.aspx>

References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre

Freephone: 0800 783 7176

Email: patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk

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