

## Why do many people with cancer have eating problems?

There are many reasons why eating habits can change. Treatments and medicines can affect how someone feels about eating. Feeling sick, having diarrhoea or constipation can stop someone eating. Feeling low, tiredness or pain can make eating difficult.

Even if the cancer is not causing any other problems, it can affect eating habits. This is because the body's response to the cancer can include a loss of appetite.

Because cancer changes the way the body uses food, it is possible to lose weight even if eating normally.

## What can I do?

You can also join the Macmillan Eating Web Discussion Group where patients and carers share their experiences of living with eating difficulties and what they have found helpful.

Read the tips in this leaflet to find out what others have found helpful when living with someone with eating difficulties.

## Further information

### *Have you got a small appetite?*

(2001) British Dietetic Association

[www.mru.nursing.soton.ac.uk/carer.html](http://www.mru.nursing.soton.ac.uk/carer.html)  
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# HELPING SOMEONE LIVE WITH CHANGES IN THEIR EATING HABITS

Information to help people living with cancer



University of Southampton | School of Nursing and Midwifery

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# Do you know someone with advanced cancer who is having problems eating?

If so, you may have one or more of the following concerns.

## Tips to help you live alongside someone with eating changes

### I find living with someone whose appetite changes is very frustrating

The amount someone with cancer can eat can change from day to day for no reason. Their likes and dislikes may even change from hour to hour.

It can be best to encourage the person to eat on the days and at the times that they feel most able to. This may not coincide with the times you normally eat. You might find it helpful to keep a stock of different foods so that you can offer them food at any time of the day.

Consider keeping tinned foods and pre-prepared frozen meals ready for the time the person feels able to eat. Quick food can be as good for them as a meal that takes a long time to prepare.

### What should I do when they can't eat much?

It can be a good idea to offer small servings on a small plate. A portion that is too large can put someone off their meal. Try offering just a small amount of one of the foods other people are eating.

Soft food is easiest to eat because it does not need a lot of chewing. Try offering porridge, Weetabix®, soups, custards, bananas, yoghurts or milk-based drinks.

You could also keep snacks on hand. Snacking on nuts, crisps, toast, chocolate or biscuits between meals can be a good idea for someone who is only able to eat a little at mealtimes.

### I find it difficult to know what to prepare

Try asking what they feel like eating. Try experimenting with different tastes. Often people who are having difficulty

eating find that they prefer cold food or foods they would not have eaten in the past.

Drinking high energy and protein fluids, such as milk shakes, smoothies, BuildUp® or Complan® can be easier than eating.

### It upsets me when they don't eat

It is natural to feel hurt if someone doesn't eat the food you have offered. Especially if it has taken you a long time to prepare, and you were hoping the person would eat a little to reward your effort. You may find yourself urging or nagging the person to eat. However, this can be unhelpful. It can lead to worry about mealtimes and further loss of the desire to eat. Consider what you would like someone to say to you if you felt unable to eat.

### I can't help watching them eat

If you are concerned about the amount someone is eating then it is understandable that you will want to watch them eat. But, it can be troubling to have someone watch what you eat.

A solution may be to allow the person who is having eating difficulties to eat on their own, if they prefer. They can then eat what they want in their own time.

## Common questions

### Do lots of people have similar problems with eating?

Difficulty eating is one of the most common problems faced by people with cancer. Many family members and friends who live with someone with cancer have concerns about the person's eating habits.

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