



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Nutrition and Covid-19

Information for patients



It has been observed that people with Covid-19 may struggle with their appetite, which can lead to unintentional weight loss and may slow your recovery.

Even though you may not feel hungry, it is still extremely important to give your body the nourishment it needs to maintain your weight and support your recovery. At these times, it is useful to think of food as a fuel for your body or as a medicine as part of your treatment.

When you are unwell or recovering from an illness, your body needs more energy and protein than it normally does, even if you are not as active. Without enough nutrition, your body will start to break down muscle tissue in order to provide an alternative energy source. As a result, the muscles you use for breathing can become weaker.

If you are feeling short of breath, it may be difficult to co-ordinate breathing and eating. Foods that require lots of chewing can also make this worse. Many people find that they lose their appetite and cannot eat as much food as usual.

Helpful Hints

- Eat slowly and breathe evenly.
- Take advantage of times when you are not as short of breath to eat more.
- Try to sit upright when eating and for at least 30 minutes afterwards.
- You may find that soft, moist foods which require less chewing are easier to eat.
- Have small meals and snacks regularly across the day, rather than waiting until you feel hungry.
- Serve food on a small plate, as a large portion can often be overwhelming.
- Avoid missing meals, as this may make you feel more unwell.
- Eat your favourite foods at any time of the day e.g. breakfast foods for dinner.
- Choose foods which are high in protein and energy (see overleaf).
- Fortify or add extra calories and protein to your food where possible (see overleaf).
- Go back to a normal diet if you have been trying to lose weight.
- Try to be as organised as possible and plan your meals, especially if someone is buying food on your behalf.
- Make sure you have enough ready-prepared food for when you are feeling too tired or unwell to cook.
- If you are struggling to get fresh fruit and vegetables, frozen and tinned options are good alternatives.
- Try drinking fluids in between your meals, as having fluids at the same time as your meal may fill you up.
- Choose nourishing fluids. Instead of water, low sugar squash and black tea/coffee, try drinking milk, milky tea/coffee, hot chocolate, Horlicks, smoothies and fruit juice.
- If you don't feel like eating, try having a drink which is high in energy and protein e.g. milk based drinks like milkshakes and smoothies.
- Straws should be avoided as they can push fluid into your mouth too quickly and cause you to cough.

Energy

The body needs energy (calories) from food to function normally. You need to provide your body with enough energy to help your recovery. High energy foods include:

- Butter, margarine and oils
- Salad dressings, mayonnaise, salad cream
- Dips and sauces (e.g. sour cream and chive)
- Cream and ice-cream
- Dried fruit
- Chocolate and sweets
- Crisps
- Sugar, honey and jam
- Pastry products (e.g. sausage rolls, pork pies)
- Cakes and puddings.

Protein

Protein forms the main structure of all cells in the body, including muscle. It is also essential for growth, repair, and providing energy. You should include a high protein food with every meal and snack. These can include:

- Meat (e.g. chicken, turkey, beef, pork, lamb)
- Fish (e.g. cod, haddock, salmon, mackerel, sardines)
- Eggs
- Dairy (e.g. milk, cheese, cottage cheese, yoghurt)
- Nuts and seeds (e.g. peanuts, cashews, almonds, walnuts, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, nut butters)
- Meat alternatives (e.g. Quorn, tofu, soya products)
- Beans, lentils and pulses.

Snack ideas

You may find it easier to have smaller meals with extra snacks in between rather than three regular meals. Try to eat frequently throughout the day e.g. every 2-3 hours. Below are some suggested snack ideas, which may also be helpful if you do not fancy a main meal.

Sweet snacks:

- Milky puddings (e.g. custard, rice pudding, Angel Delight)
- Full fat yoghurts
- Dessert pots (e.g. trifles, cheesecake, sponges, fruit fools, mousses, instant whips, crème caramel)
- Ice-creams
- A bowl of cereal/porridge
- Dried fruit
- Bite sized cakes (e.g. flapjacks, mini rolls, millionaires' shortbread, Bakewell tarts)
- Croissants and other sweet pastries
- Cereal bars/biscuits
- Fruit with peanut butter or chocolate spreads.

Savoury snacks:

- Sandwiches with a variety of fillings (e.g. meat, fish, cheese, egg, houmous, avocado)
- Toast, crumpets or English muffins with a variety of toppings (e.g. butter, nut butters, jam)
- Eggs (e.g. omelette, frittata, boiled eggs, quiche)
- Savoury pastries (e.g. mini sausages rolls, scotch eggs, pork pies)
- Mini Indian or Chinese party food. (e.g. samosas, onion bhajis, spring rolls)
- Breadsticks, crisps or vegetables with dips (e.g. houmous, sour cream, tzatziki, guacamole)
- Cheese and crackers
- Savoury biscuits (e.g. mini cheddars, Ryvita, oat cakes)
- Nuts and seeds.

Food Fortification

Fortifying your foods will help add extra calories and protein without having to increase your portion size. This will help if you are finding large meals overwhelming. Some suggestions include:

- Add milk, grated cheese beans or lentils, croutons, pasta, potato to soups.
- Add milk, butter or grated cheese to potatoes.
- Add olive oil dressings/salad cream/mayonnaise to salads/sandwiches
- Serve puddings and fruit with full fat yoghurt, cream, custard, ice-cream.
- Add full fat yoghurt, cream, sugar/honey/syrup, fruit, nuts and seeds to breakfast cereals and porridge.
- Use fortified milk in substitution for your normal milk. To one pint of full fat milk add four tablespoons of a milk powder, e.g. Marvel, Five Pints.

What about healthy eating?

If you are concerned about eating high sugar and fat foods, you may wish to choose some of the following options. These are still high in protein, but contain less saturated fat, sugar and salt.

- Low or reduced fat dairy (e.g. milk, cheese, yoghurt)
- Eggs
- Lean meats (e.g. chicken)
- Unsalted nuts and seeds
- Unsaturated oils (e.g. olive, sunflower, rice bran)
- Nut spreads (e.g. peanut butter)
- Reduced fat salad dressings, margarines or mayonnaise
- Avocado

Symptom Management

Some people with Covid-19 have reported some of the following symptoms, which may impact on your eating and drinking:

Taste Changes:

- Use herbs, spices and seasoning to flavour food.
- Marinating or cooking in sauces may enhance the taste.
- Opt for strong or sharp flavours which are more distinct (e.g. pickle/chutney, extra mature cheeses, fresh fruit/juices).
- Cold foods may be more palatable than hot foods.

Dry mouth:

- Keep your mouth clean and healthy and ensure you continue to brush your teeth regularly.
- Make sure you are well hydrated by drinking fluids regularly.
- Ice cubes or ice lollies may help to moisten your mouth.
- Use sauces and gravies to moisten your food.
- Avoid very dry foods which can be hard to eat (e.g. bread, pastry, tough meat).
- Chewing gum and boiled sweets may help to stimulate saliva.
- Use lip balm on dry lips.

Feeling sick:

- First thing in the morning try dry foods, such as crackers or plain biscuits.
- If possible, let someone else do the cooking as sometimes the smell can make you feel sick.
- Avoid fatty or fried foods.
- Aim for smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day.
- Some people find the following may be useful: food or drink containing ginger, peppermint tea, sipping a fizzy drink.

Nutritional Supplements

You may find it difficult to maintain or gain weight through food alone.

Oral nutritional supplements are available from supermarkets and local pharmacies. They do not require a GP prescription. These are high protein enriched drinks, which are available in many forms. For example, Meritene, Complan and Aymes Retail are powder based drinks which can be made up with full fat milk. It is important to have these between your meals and not as a meal replacement.

If you continue to lose weight despite the above advice, then you should speak to your consultant or GP about a referral to a dietitian.

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