

# Moving oncology care forward so that you can look forward to life's moments

*Diarrhoea in  
persons receiving  
cancer treatment*

# Managing diarrhoea in persons receiving cancer treatment

Diarrhoea is often a symptom of cancer itself and/or cancer treatment and can be defined as passing three or more loose or watery stools per day. The most dangerous result of diarrhoea is dehydration. Dehydration is when your body loses too much water and electrolytes (salts such as sodium, potassium, chloride and bicarbonate) which you are unable to replace. Dehydration can be life-threatening, and it is thus important to treat diarrhoea and seek medical assistance when diarrhoea persists.

Diarrhoea can also prevent your body from absorbing adequate nutrients from food, which can lead to malnutrition (undernutrition). Malnutrition in cancer patients is associated with negative outcomes such as increased hospital admissions, longer hospital stays, increased healthcare costs, increased risk for infections, reduced tolerance and compliance to treatment and reduced effectiveness of treatment.

It is thus important that you manage diarrhoea to ensure optimal health outcomes.

## / Dehydration signs and symptoms



Feeling thirsty



Dry mouth, lips  
and tongue



Palpitations



Cold and  
clammy skin



Feeling tired



Feeling dizzy /  
light-headed



Dark-yellow, strong  
smelling urine



Not urinating as  
often as usual



Sunken eyes






Headache

## 2 Malnutrition warning signs and symptoms

It is not always easy to see when you are malnourished, thus it is necessary to look out for the warning signs and symptoms that you may be malnourished.

The warning signs and symptoms of malnutrition include:

The following table lists the warning signs and symptoms of malnutrition, each accompanied by an icon:

 Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea	 Loss of appetite	 Sudden unexpected weight loss	 Feeling tired
 Muscle weakness or loss of fat and muscle wasting	 Getting sick often	 Slow-healing wounds	 Swelling in your ankles, legs or belly

## 3 Managing diarrhoea symptoms

What to do	What to avoid
Sip slowly on fluids between meals, and 1 hour after meals	Avoid deep-fried food and food high in fat
Eat small meals regularly (5-6 times / day)	Avoid spicy foods
Use soya milk or cow's milk substitutes instead of cow's milk	Avoid sugary foods

# Managing diarrhoea in persons receiving cancer treatment

<p>Drink plenty of fluid (6-8 glasses / day) such as safe-drinking water, clear juices (without fruit pieces in it), weak rooibos tea, energy drinks that are not caffeinated or oral rehydration solutions (available over-the-counter at the pharmacy)</p>	<p>Avoid foods high in insoluble fibre e.g., whole-grain bread / crackers / cereals, brown / white rice, whole-wheat pasta, couscous, quinoa, oats / oat bran, mealie meal (pap), sorghum (mabele porridge) pearled barley, bulgur wheat, popcorn, potatoes (with skin on), corn, legumes (beans, peas and lentils), nuts and seeds, berries, dried fruit, raw fruits and vegetables with their skin on</p>
<p>Include food sources high in soluble fibre in your diet e.g., oats/oatmeal, barley, nuts, white-flour products (white bread, bagels and pasta), white rice, corn, natural applesauce (no sugar added), peeled apple, pears (peeled), oranges, nectarines, apricots, potatoes (peeled)</p>	<p>Avoid eating raw vegetables</p>
	<p>Avoid eating the skins, seeds and membranes of fruits and vegetables</p>
	<p>Avoid prunes, rhubarb and papaya</p>
	<p>Avoid orange and prune juices</p>
<p>Try a low-fat, low-fibre, and low-dairy diet chicken (no skin), fish, white rice, peeled and cooked fruits and vegetables, applesauce and dry white toast)</p>	<p>Avoid very hot foods and fluids</p>
	<p>Avoid milk and dairy products</p>
<p>Ensure that you consume adequate amounts of food from all the food groups for optimal nutrition</p>	<p>Avoid drinking fluids with meals</p>
	<p>Avoid caffeinated beverages, alcohol and tobacco</p>
	<p>Avoid sugar-free gum and sweets containing sorbitol (sorbitol acts like a laxative)</p>

## 4 General recommendations



Ask your healthcare provider about anti-diarrhoea medication. Follow up with your healthcare provider if the anti-diarrhoea medication is not controlling your diarrhoea.

Life Oncology units have multidisciplinary teams that can support you during your journey to recovery – this includes registered dietitians (RDs).

The following are some of the areas a registered dietitian can help you in:



Assess your nutritional status and your current dietary intake



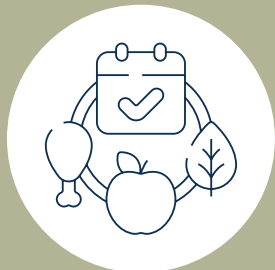
Provide you with an individualised meal plan for optimal nutrition



Recommend appropriate oral supplements to provide you with additional nutrients, including protein and energy when you are not meeting your nutritional needs through food alone



Provide you with guidelines on how to manage cancer treatment side effects that influence your dietary intake



If you need assistance with any of the above areas – ask your healthcare provider to refer you to a registered dietitian.

# References

## **World Health Organisation**

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/diarrhoeal-disease>

## **CANSA**

<https://cansa.org.za/files/2021/04/Fact-Sheet-on-Nutritional-Guidelines-for-Individuals-Undergoing-Cancer-Treatment-April-2021.pdf>

## **National Healthcare Services UK**

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dehydration/>

## **Kidney Cancer Canada**

<https://www.kidneycancer canada.ca/managing-side-effects/#diarrhea>

## **Cleveland Clinic**

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/10257-chemotherapy-side-effects>

## **America Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition**

[https://www.nutritioncare.org/uploadedFiles/Documents/Malnutrition/MAW\\_2021/Consumer-Info-Sheet-Cancer\\_8.5.21.pdf](https://www.nutritioncare.org/uploadedFiles/Documents/Malnutrition/MAW_2021/Consumer-Info-Sheet-Cancer_8.5.21.pdf)

## **Nutrician & Diagnosis-Related Care**

Escott-Stump, S. (2015). China: Wolters Kluwer.

## **Krause's Food and the Nutrician wwCare Process.**

Mahan, L. K., Escott-Stump, S., & Raymond, J. L. (2012). St. Louis: Elsevier Saunders.

## **NHS UK**

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-types/starchy-foods-and-carbohydrates/>

## **Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Oncology Nutrition**

<https://www.oncologynutrition.org/erfc/eating-well-when-unwell/chemotherapy/constipation-diarrhea-and-fiber>

[www.lifehealthcare.co.za](http://www.lifehealthcare.co.za)

**Life** Oncology

*Making life better*