

# Nutrition During Head & Neck Radiotherapy

Head and neck cancer and its treatments can change your ability to eat and drink, particularly due to side effects, which are unwanted or unplanned effects of the treatment you are receiving.

Your Dietitian and Speech Pathologist will give you care and advice during your treatment.

During radiotherapy your body needs more energy (calories or kilojoules) and protein. The goal during treatment is to maintain your weight. By eating well it helps to:

- Maintain your weight
- Support your immune system
- Support recovery and healing and reduces risk of hospital admission due to poor nutrition and dehydration



## Side effects of radiotherapy

Side effects of radiotherapy are different for each person.

Most people experience some side effects during and after treatment. These side effects include:

- Pain in your mouth or throat
- Difficulty swallowing due to food or drinks going down the wrong way/getting stuck
- Fatigue (feeling tired)
- Dry mouth or thick/sticky saliva
- Taste change
- Poor appetite

## Tips for if you have pain in your throat or mouth:

Pain can develop at any time during treatment or even before you start. It is important to manage your pain as it can stop you from eating and drinking. It can also affect your mental health.

- Take pain relief medications as prescribed by your doctor
- Use numbing creams or other topical anesthetics approximately 10 minutes before you eat or drink. These can help relieve the pain in your mouth and throat and help you eat and drink better
- Keep a pain diary. This will help your treating team to better manage your pain
- Try to eat soft moist foods and avoid hard or crunchy foods
- Avoid vinegar, spices, salty foods, spicy foods, alcohol/ alcohol based mouthwashes, very hot temperature foods or drinks, citrus fruits and juices and tomato based foods

## Tips for if you have swallowing difficulty:

If you find it hard to swallow food or drinks it is important to speak to your Speech Pathologist. Your Speech Pathologist can guide you on the types of foods or drinks that are safer and easier for you to swallow.

## Tips for if you are feeling tired:

Going through cancer treatment can cause physical and emotional stress. You need to look after yourself and rest when needed.

- Ask for help from family or friends
- Prepare food in bulk when able to, and freeze/store for when you don't feel like cooking
- Use convenience foods like meal kits, pre-cut vegetables and jars of sauce and seasoning packets
- Use ready-to-eat or pre-prepared foods such as frozen meals/ dumplings, snacks and beverages
- Talk to your health practitioner about support options and services available



## Tips for if you have dry mouth and thick /sticky saliva:

Radiotherapy to the head and neck area can cause dry mouth. It is important to keep your mouth clean and as moist as possible.

- Complete regular mouth care as recommended by your healthcare team
- Moisten meals with sauces and gravies
- Choose softer meal options such as soups, stews, casseroles or congee
- Have frequent sips of fluids during the day and with meals
- Chewing sugar free gum can stimulate saliva production
- Try dry mouth products advised by your healthcare team
- Avoid dehydrating fluids such as alcohol and or highly caffeinated drinks
- Try sparkling water, grape juice, or papaya to help break up thick secretions
- A nebuliser may assist to loosen thick secretions and make them easier to bring up and clear (ask your healthcare team to see if this is appropriate for you)



## Tips for if you have taste changes:

Some treatments to the head and neck may affect the way you taste food. Food may taste bitter, metallic or may not have as much flavour. It can take several months for taste to return to normal or this might be a permanent issue.

- If you are losing your taste, try adding herbs, seasonings and flavourings
- Marinade meats with ginger or garlic and try adding sauces and flavourings like soy sauce, plum sauce and miso
- Freshen your mouth with sugar free mints or gum, brush your teeth and use mouthwashes before and after you eat/ drink



## Tips for when your appetite is poor:

All these side effects mentioned above can impact your desire to eat and drink.

- Instead of relying on appetite, eat every 2-3 hours or 6-8 small meals each day instead of 3 large ones
- Make every mouthful count by eating nourishing foods and snacks. These are foods high in protein and energy. For example add meat/ chicken/ egg/ tofu/ beans/dumplings to soups/ stews/ congee. Or snack on cheese and biscuits or yoghurt
- Choose nourishing fluids such as milk/soy milk/juice over less nourishing fluids like water/tea/black coffee/diet drinks

Try nutritional supplement drinks, these are drinks that can help you get the nutrients you need – ask your Dietitian to discuss suitable options

For more information and practical tips watch our NSLHD Nutrition talk series which cover a range of subjects including mouth pain, fatigue, dry mouth, and taste changes: [Nutrition Talks Series-Northern Sydney Local Health District](#)

## Tube feeding:

Depending on your treatment plan you might need to have a feeding tube inserted before you start your treatment.

This tube stays in for the duration of your treatment and usually a few months after finishing treatment. You will have regular follow up with your Dietitian who will decide when the tube can be removed depending on your recovery, weight and food intake.

Your Dietitian will show you how to use the tube for feeding and will answer your questions.

For more information on your feeding plan please refer to the “Tube feeding at home” booklet provided.

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