

# Information for patients and carers

## A Guide to Soft and Liquidised Food for Head and Neck Cancer Patients



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## Introduction

Chewing and swallowing problems can occur at different times during your illness and treatment. The side effects that you experience will be individual to you and will depend on the position of the cancer and the treatment you receive. After head and neck surgery or during radiotherapy you may need to have a soft or blended diet and some people need a feeding tube to support them to get adequate nutrition and hydration.

Unless advised against this by your H&N team, it is important that you continue to eat and drink throughout your treatment. This will help you maintain your swallowing function, and your nutritional status for recovery. This leaflet provides information and tips for managing side effects and optimising your food intake.

## During Radiotherapy

Although targeted at the cancer, radiotherapy causes damage to the surrounding healthy tissues which may include your taste buds and salivary glands. This can result in your mouth becoming very dry, and/or experiencing very thick secretions. You may also experience pain on swallowing. Below are some suggestions for during treatment:

- Be cautious with foods that are spicy, salty or acidic (for example fruits and juices, tomato sauces).
- Let your hot food or drink cool slightly before consuming.
- If you notice your portion sizes are getting smaller, or you have stopped snacking, try to get additional nutrition from drinks and food fortification methods (see page 5).
- Consider timing pain control before mealtimes, to improve comfort on oral intake.
- Ask your head and neck team about different mouth rinses to try. Using bicarbonate of soda or salt mouthwashes, or a steam cup can help people to manage secretions.
- If you are struggling with your eating and drinking, it may be helpful to start keeping a record of your food and fluid intake.

The side effects of radiotherapy worsen during treatment and during the first weeks afterwards. They then subsequently subside, to settle down roughly 6-8 weeks after the end of treatment. Saliva production and taste changes can be affected for a longer period, and your saliva production may not return to your baseline.

## Soft Diet

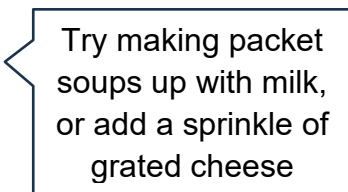
If you are able to manage normal foods, but need softer textures, this section will give you some meal ideas and tips. Try to aim for 5-6 small meals or snacks every day:

### Breakfast

- Porridge or instant oat cereals like Ready Brek with full fat milk or cream
- Cereals like Weetabix or Rice Crispies with warm milk
- Full fat yoghurts
- Soft fruit such as banana, if tolerated, with yoghurt or cream
- Scrambled eggs made with butter/milk

### Meals

- Crustless sandwiches or jacket potatoes with soft fillings such as egg or tuna mayonnaise, cream cheese, pâté.
- Soups (creamed varieties) homemade, tinned or packet e.g. chicken, mushroom, pea, lentil
- Corned beef hash
- Slow cooked stews/ casseroles
- Omelette or scrambled egg with cheese
- Tinned dishes e.g. ravioli, macaroni cheese, beans, spaghetti, sardines and pilchards with sauce.
- Fish in sauce such as parsley sauce, cheese sauce, hollandaise



Try making packet soups up with milk, or add a sprinkle of grated cheese

Ready meals such as cottage or fish pie and pasta dishes are a good option, especially if you are struggling with fatigue.

Softer meal swaps can be much lower in energy, for example if you swapped from a sandwich to soup, so make sure your weight is being monitored and try to add in regular desserts:

### **Soft Puddings:**

- Rice pudding pots
- Crème Caramel
- Trifles
- Sponge and Custard
- Fruit with cream or custard
- Yoghurts
- Ice cream

If you are coughing while eating or drinking, or feel that food is lodging in the throat, raise this with your review team who may request input from a Speech and Language Therapist to assess your swallow.

## **Food Fortification**

Fats are densely packed with energy so adding fat sources to meals is a good way of increasing your energy intake without altering portion size. Make sure to opt for 'full fat' products when shopping.

Examples of ways to boost your meal by 100kcal:

- Small handful grated cheese (25g)
- Heaped tablespoon double cream (20ml)
- 1-2 tablespoons (20g) dry whole milk powder or 30g of skimmed milk powder
- 1 tablespoon peanut butter or tahini(15g)
- 2 tablespoons pesto (35g)
- 1 tablespoon oil or 2 small cubes butter (15g)
- Salad dressing (~25ml)

## Liquidised Diet

If you need a very smooth lump free consistency you can use a blender or food processor. Hand blenders can be bought quite cheaply and are useful for blending small single portions of food.

Foods should be prepared and cooked as usual before blending. Adding stock, gravy, soup, milk or single cream makes them easier to liquidise. It is better to use one of the above to help obtain the correct consistency rather than water, as they will provide you with additional nourishment.

### **Savoury sauces:**

- Dried packet sauces made up with milk e.g. white sauce.
- Cook in sauces, creamy rather than tomato based.
- Undiluted condensed soups e.g. onion, celery, mushroom.
- Gravy or cheese granules.

### **Sweet options:**

- Fortified full fat milk (see recipe on page 5)
- Evaporated or condensed milk
- Cream
- Full fat or Greek style yoghurts
- Custard

Blending the different elements of a meal separately and incorporating different colours of vegetables can help maintain the appeal and palatability of meals. When cooking meats remember to remove the skin, bone and gristle before cooking. Try adding a rich gravy, stock or sauce to help improve flavour.

## Meal ideas

- Soup blended or strained.
- Blended pasta dishes e.g. ravioli, macaroni cheese, lasagne and bolognaise.
- Fish blended with cheese or white sauce.
- Minced meat (turkey/mince/beef/lamb) and gravy. Blend well with stock or white sauce when cooked.
- Meat dishes – corned beef hash, cottage or shepherd's pie, hot pot, casseroles. Add extra stock, soup or gravy to blend.
- Fish dishes – fisherman's pie, boil in the bag fish with sauce. Vegetarian/cheese dishes – cauliflower cheese, cheese and mashed potatoes, cheese pudding, lentil bake, cheesy potato bake.

There are soft and purée options offered by meal delivery services such as Wiltshire Farm Foods and Oakhouse foods. Choose level 4 meal options for completely smooth meals. Alternatively, you could get supermarket ready meals and blend with added sauce after cooking.

## Nourishing Drinks

People receiving head and neck cancer treatments are more prone to dehydration and so it is important to make efforts to maintain good fluid intake. Try to avoid drinking large amounts just before meals as this can be very filling, although small sips of fluid with meals may help with swallowing.

Your Fluid Requirements are .....

Nourishing drinks can help you meet your energy and protein needs; good options include:

- Milky coffees, hot chocolate, or malted milk drinks
- Smoothies made with nut butters/ yoghurt
- Milkshake
- Yoghurt drinks

To get additional energy from these drinks make them up with fortified milk.

### Fortified Milk Recipe:

- 1 pint or 600ml full cream milk
- 4 tablespoons skimmed milk powder

If you had this through the day it would give you an additional **600 calories** and **40g protein**

Put the powder into a jug and add the milk gradually, stirring all the time until all the powder has dissolved. Store in the fridge and use this in place of ordinary milk on cereals, in tea and coffee or in cooking.

### Other nourishing drink ideas:

#### Honey Cup

- 200mls full fat milk
- 2 heaped tablespoons milk powder
- 2 teaspoons honey

Warm the milk add the milk powder, then pour into the cup with the honey and stir well.

#### Yoghurt Flip

- 150ml full fat milk
- 1 heaped tablespoon milk powder
- 1 carton 150g creamy fruit yoghurt

Whisk all ingredients together in a tall glass. Serve chilled.

## Oral Nutritional Supplement Drinks

Your dietitian may discuss the use of nutritional supplements with you. There are a wide range of supplement products available, and your dietitian can request a prescription of these from your GP.

## Dental Hygiene

After radiotherapy, there is increased risk of dental decay and gum disease, and so good dental hygiene is extremely important. During treatment it is often necessary to optimise your energy intake by adding puddings and milky drinks. Please talk to us about any concerns you may have about managing suitable diet and maintaining good oral hygiene.

## Constipation

The dietary adaptations and pain medication, as well as a reduction in your usual activity levels can lead to constipation.

- Stay hydrated. If you are dehydrated your stools can be dryer and harder to pass.
- Try to include dietary fibre, for example pulses in soups or soft wholegrain cereals.
- Adapting your position on the toilet to a squatting position by putting your feet on a stool and leaning towards your knees.

Although above changes can be effective, medication is often indicated to manage constipation so let your Head and Neck team know as soon as you start having any issues.

## Tube Feeding

Some patients undergoing treatment for head and neck cancer will require a feeding tube to be placed to support them to get adequate food and fluid. There are several different types of feeding tubes. Some are placed prior to treatment in anticipation of reduced or nil oral intake; these are called prophylactic gastrostomies. Gastrostomy tubes are placed through the abdominal wall and so are more practical and discrete and appropriate for longer term use (minimum 10 weeks).

Nasogastric tubes (NGT) are used for short-term feeding, for example if during your radiotherapy treatment your swallow becomes unsafe, or you are unable to manage adequate amounts orally. We can place these during treatment. The NGT is passed via your nostril and down into your stomach and will remain in place until you are able to manage adequate nutrition and hydration orally. People can be trained to manage their own NGT, and the dietitian will create a feeding plan for them.

Some people become completely reliant on a feeding tube for nutrition, hydration, and medications, but many people use them in addition to their oral intake.

## Notes

(You can use these pages to keep a log of your weight, note down your dietetic plan, or keep a food diary)

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## Contact details

Should you require further advice or information please contact the Dietetics Department on **01772 522467**

## Sources of further information

[www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk)  
[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
[www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)  
[www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

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If you want to stop smoking, you can also contact Smokefree Lancashire on Freephone **08081962638**

**Please ask a member of staff if you would like help in understanding this information.**

**This information can be made available in large print, audio, Braille and in other languages.**

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