

Palliative care – nutrition for children

This resource has information to help your child during palliative care. Food is not only important for nourishment, but also as a source of pleasure and comfort. Parents and carers of children who are unwell are often worried about making sure their child's nutritional needs are met. Food is important for improving quality of life, relieving symptoms and to provide pleasure and comfort.

This information sheet provides advice on how to manage some of the common nutritional challenges during the palliative care phase of your child's illness. If you would like more information, ask your healthcare team to put you in touch with a dietitian.

Minimising weight loss

Loss of appetite resulting in weight loss is common in palliative care. It is very difficult for family and carers to watch their child lose weight. There are many reasons for weight loss including nausea and vomiting, anxiety, and decreased food intake. However, the disease process itself plays the biggest role.

It is important to understand that your child's reluctance to eat is not always a reflection of the foods you are offering.

Focus on making eating an enjoyable experience.

- Let your child eat the foods that they feel like. It is better to eat and enjoy rather than struggle to maintain a balanced diet.
- Create a positive eating environment - share meals and eat together. If your child is not well enough to eat at the table, consider sharing meals in a room where your child can lay down, where safe to do so.
- Try not to comment if food goes uneaten.
- Try to offer past favourite foods.
- Small frequent meals may be easier to eat. Offer food every couple of hours if your child has no appetite. Small meals are less overwhelming.
- Ignore set mealtimes - encourage your child to eat when they feel hungry.

- Food preferences will change often - offer a variety of foods.
- Soft foods that are easy to chew and swallow may be easier to eat.
- Chewing on gum, sucking on icy chips, sugar free lollies or ice blocks may help make more saliva if your child is experiencing dry mouth.

Fortifying foods

Your child may find it difficult to eat large volumes of food. Eating small amounts of energy dense foods may help your child maintain their weight. The following ideas help to increase the energy content of foods your child enjoys. It is important not to force a food if your child does not like it.

- Creamy milk drinks are easy to consume. Try adding ice cream, frozen yoghurt, milk powder (1 tablespoon per glass) or cream to fortify.
- Blend fruits with full cream milk and ice cream to make smoothies.
- Add butter or margarine and oil to plain cooked vegetables. Salts and sauces can be used to improve flavour.
- Add cream to soups and scrambled eggs.
- Add creamy dips with crackers.
- Nutritional supplements can be a useful source of energy and nutrients. *Sustagen*® can be found in the supermarket and *Pediasure*® in the chemist. Obtaining supplements with a prescription can help reduce the cost. Altering the serving temperature may help. Some children like these drinks served very cold, others prefer room temperature. Add supplements to smoothies and milkshakes. For further advice about supplements ask to speak with a dietitian.

Tube feeding

There may come a time when your child is not able to eat or drink enough. Food and fluid can be given through a feeding tube to help meet nutrition needs. Not all families decide that tube feeding is right for their child. Talk to your health care team or dietitian for information.

Nausea and / or vomiting

Nausea, with or without vomiting, is common during palliative care. The cause can be hard to identify. It may be related to your child's medications, anxiety, or progression of the disease. Always notify your health care team, as they will be able to decide on the most appropriate treatment.

- Small, frequent meals are usually better tolerated.
- Smells of cooking foods can make nausea worse. Try to keep your child away from the kitchen, serve foods cold or cook in the microwave to reduce smells.
- Try dry salty foods such as vegemite on toast, crackers, plain boiled vegetables (add salt to taste) and plain potato chips.
- Getting enough fluid is important. Encourage fluids such as water, flat lemonade, ginger beer, ice blocks or sports drink.
- Fresh air can help; try a gentle walk or push in the pram or wheelchair outside or open the windows and doors in the house.

Constipation

There are many reasons why your child may become constipated. Pain control medications are a common cause. Reduced food and fluid intake and decreased activity can also contribute. While diet alone may not be able to treat constipation, there are some strategies you can try:

- Offer plenty of fluids.
- Offer small frequent meals during the day.
- Try to include some high fibre foods. Add fruits to smoothies or serve with desserts (e.g. banana and custard, strawberries and cream). To save on time and preparation, tinned or frozen fruit is a good alternative.
- Try soft mashed vegetables, or vegetables grated in meat dishes.
- Try baked beans. They are high in fibre and easy to consume.
- Add legumes and lentils to casseroles and meat dishes.
- Try pear juice or prune juice.

Easy meal and snack ideas

- Extra creamy yoghurts (e.g. Greek style)
- Ice cream with topping or *Milo*®
- Chocolate dairy desserts
- Add ice-cream, cream, or toppings, *Milo*®, *Nesquik*® to milkshakes.
- Blend banana, mango, or berries into smoothies with frozen yoghurt.
- Fizzy drink or slushie
- Creamy custards
- Two-minute noodles
- Cheese sticks or cubes
- Avocado on toast or crackers
- Hot potato chips
- Fish fingers
- Cheese on toast
- Iced paddy cakes
- Peanut butter
- *Milo*® with milk or ice cream
- *Shapes*™ biscuits
- Spring Rolls
- *Jatz*™ and creamed cheese, hummus or creamy dips
- Marshmallows
- Garlic or Herb bread
- Potato gems
- Small snack packs of children's biscuits
- Pikelets or pancakes with butter or jam or cream or ice cream
- Creamy Potato Bake
- Potato Salad
- Sausage Rolls
- Fairy bread with margarine or butter spread thickly
- Roast vegetable fingers (find these in the freezer section) with added butter or oil.
- Caramel tarts
- Iceblocks

- Yoghurt tubes
- Chips
- Buttered popcorn
- Crackers and cheese
- Creamed rice
- Chicken nuggets
- Chicken Wings
- Home-made mini pizzas
- Cheese and bacon rolls
- Creamy vegetable pasta bake
- Add cream, bacon, or cheese to scrambled eggs.
- Boiled eggs with toast fingers to dip
- Raisin toast with butter or margarine
- Saos with vegemite and cheese, cream cheese or avocado
- Toasties with baked beans and cheese or ham and cheese.
- Sausage sizzles
- 'Spiders' – fizzy drinks with scoops of ice cream

Alternative diets

There are an overwhelming number of diets on the market, some that make extraordinary claims. Many of the supplements and diets available on the market are very expensive.

You may wish to try alternative diets or supplements with your child. Some supplements can provide important nutrients and energy. Unfortunately, most alternative diets can lead to limited food choices and worsen symptoms that impact on eating. A restrictive or limited diet may be stressful for both you and your child and may reduce quality of life.

Your healthcare team can help you make decisions about these diets. For further information and support, speak to your healthcare team.

Nutritional needs of the carer

Caring for a child who is unwell is both physically and emotionally demanding. Your own nutritional needs are also important. Try to eat a varied diet as much as possible to stay healthy. The following tips may be helpful, particularly during more stressful times.

- Meal preparation can be time consuming. Where possible cook in bulk and freeze meal sized portions for later.
- Do your grocery shopping online, and have your goods home delivered. Some online home delivery websites include:
 - <http://www.coles.com.au>
 - <http://www.woolworths.com.au>
 - <https://www.aussiefarmers.com.au/>
 - <https://www.groceryrun.com.au/>
- Friends and family will often ask what they can do to help. You could suggest they bring prepared meals that can be frozen, fruit platters, ready to eat snacks or even a takeaway meal for you to share. The following websites can be useful to help family and friends coordinate meals, such as:
 - Take them a meal: <https://www.takethemameal.com/>
 - Meal Train: <https://www.mealtrain.com/start/>
- Frozen supermarket meals are a good substitute for home cooking when you are too tired or busy to cook.
- Stock your pantry with easy to prepare snacks or meals: baked beans, tinned soup, eggs, pasta, pasta sauces, frozen vegetables, frozen meat and fish.
- Consider nutritional supplements such as *Sustagen*® as a meal replacement for yourself.
- Consider a multivitamin or mineral supplement if you are struggling to eat a balanced diet.
- Don't deny yourself the pleasure of eating with friends and family. Ask visitors to bring over a sweet treat to share over coffee, or ingredients to make a meal together.

For further information contact your Dietitian or Nutritionist:
