



# Eating well

A guide to diet and bowel cancer



**Bowel Cancer**UK  
Beating bowel cancer together

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# About this booklet

This booklet has information about how food can affect your symptoms during and after bowel cancer treatment.

After treatment, you may find you can't eat the same foods as you did before. These changes may be temporary or they may be longer-lasting.

We've included a food and symptoms diary at the end of the booklet on [page 39](#), to help you find out how different foods affect you. We've also listed contact details for useful organisations.

If you have recently been diagnosed with cancer or if you're having treatment for cancer, speak to your healthcare team or dietitian for diet advice.

## Support for you

As well as the information in this booklet, we also have a range of other information and support that you might find useful.

### Online community

Join our online community for everyone affected by bowel cancer at [bowelcanceruk.org.uk/community](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk/community)

### Ask the Nurse

Contact our nurses if you have any questions or concerns at [bowelcanceruk.org.uk/nurse](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk/nurse)

### Publications

Order or download our free publications at [bowelcanceruk.org.uk/ourpublications](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk/ourpublications)

### Website

Find out more about bowel cancer at [bowelcanceruk.org.uk](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk)

# What is a balanced diet?

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**It's important to follow a healthy, balanced diet to help you feel physically and emotionally well.**

Your balanced diet will be individual to you. It will depend on your age, body weight, gender and how active you are. The foods you can eat may vary during and after your cancer treatment and you may find you can't eat the same foods as you did before bowel cancer.

Try to eat plenty of vegetables and fruits each day, with some low fat dairy products and lean protein like skinless chicken, fish or pulses. Limit your intake of saturated fats and sugars. Carbohydrates, such as bread, pasta and rice, are important for energy but choose wholegrains unless your healthcare team has advised you to follow a low-fibre diet.

The NHS website has an Eatwell Guide, which shows how much of each food type to include in your diet. Remember, this is general information so you may need to change it to meet your needs during and after cancer treatment.

You may hear about diets that claim to help people with cancer by cutting out types of food, such as dairy. There is often no evidence that these work and some can be harmful.

## Remember

Always speak to your healthcare team or a dietitian before making any big changes to your diet.

# Before surgery

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**You can help support your recovery from surgery by eating a healthy, balanced diet before your operation.**

Foods high in protein, such as chicken, fish and eggs, can help your body heal and lower the risk of wound infection. Fibre-rich carbohydrates, such as wholegrain bread, rice and pasta, can give you energy and may help you get up and about quickly after surgery.

Many hospitals have an enhanced recovery programme, which includes offering you carbohydrate-rich drinks for a few days before and after your operation. This can help with healing and recovery after surgery.

# During treatment

Cancer treatment can affect your appetite and your ability to eat and drink. It can also affect your senses of taste and smell. If you feel sick or are being sick you may not feel like eating.

## More information

You can read more about eating with a low appetite on [page 16](#) and eating when you have fatigue on [page 21](#).

### Tips for eating during treatment

- If you have a small appetite, try eating smaller meals more often during the day
- If you're not getting enough nutrients from your food, try high calorie or 'build up' drinks. You can buy these from pharmacies or your dietitian may give you a prescription for them
- If you feel sick, you could try drinking ginger or peppermint tea, or eating ginger biscuits. Eating a small amount of plain food every two to three hours can help. Avoid fatty, spicy and strong smelling foods
- If you have a sore mouth, you could try eating soft or liquid foods, such as porridge, smoothies, soups, well-cooked casseroles and stews. Avoid salty or spiced foods
- Speak to your GP or healthcare team if you're still not eating or drinking enough. They may refer you to a dietitian or give you treatment to help you get the nutrients you need

# After treatment

The following pages suggest how you can include the important food groups in your diet when you're recovering from bowel cancer. If you have recently been diagnosed with cancer or if you're having treatment for cancer, speak to your healthcare team or dietitian for advice.

## Vegetables and fruit

Vegetables and fruits are rich in vitamins, minerals, fibre and other special plant nutrients that are important for health. Aim for at least five portions of vegetables and fruit each day, ideally more vegetables than fruit, and include a range of different colours and types.

Vegetables and fruit are a good source of fibre, which helps keep your digestive system working well. You can read more about fibre on [page 13](#).

You may need to follow a low-fibre diet during and after treatment. Your healthcare team will give you information on how to include enough vegetables and fruit in your diet. They may refer you to a dietitian if you need more help with your diet.

Some people find they're not able to cope with eating some types of fruit or vegetables. For example, some vegetables, like broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts can cause bowel problems, such as wind. The food and symptoms diary on [page 39](#) can help you find out which foods are causing your bowel symptoms.

One portion is the same as:

- 30g unsweetened dried fruit
- 80g beans or pulses – maximum of one portion a day
- 150ml juices or smoothies – maximum of one portion a day

Other examples of portion sizes are listed below.

### Examples of portion sizes



One apple



Two kiwis



One red pepper



One to two handfuls of raspberries



One carrot

### Starchy carbohydrates

Starchy carbohydrates (sometimes called complex carbohydrates) are a good source of energy. You should eat some carbohydrate every day. You can get carbohydrate from foods like bread, pasta, cereals, rice and grains and starchy vegetables like potatoes and sweet potatoes.

Unless your healthcare team has advised you to follow a low-fibre diet, limit your intake of white varieties of bread, pasta, rice and skinless potatoes. Instead, choose wholegrain varieties and leave the skin on potatoes. Wholegrain foods often contain more nutrients, like fibre, and help you feel full for longer. You can read more about fibre on [page 13](#).

## Protein

Protein is important for cell growth and repair and for helping your body recover after surgery or cancer treatment.

Good sources of protein include chicken, fish, eggs, nuts and seeds. Nuts and seeds contain lots of nutrients but also have high levels of fat so keep to a modest handful each day. They are also high in fibre, so don't eat too many if your healthcare team has advised you to follow a low-fibre diet.

Other plant-based foods, such as beans, peas and pulses, also contain protein but you may not be able to eat these if you have diarrhoea or wind – see [pages 27 and 34](#) for more information.

Meat is another good source of protein but eating a lot of red and processed meat may increase the risk of bowel cancer. Red meat includes beef, pork, lamb, venison and goat. Limit the amount you eat to no more than three portions a week (350g–500g of cooked meat a week) and try to have some meat-free days.

Try to eat smaller portions – about the size of a deck of playing cards – and choose lean varieties. You could replace some of the meat in casseroles and stews with vegetables, beans or lentils, if you can eat them.

Avoid processed meat, such as bacon and ham. Processed meat is preserved by smoking, curing, salting or adding preservatives. Hamburgers, sausages and minced meats only count as processed meat if they have been preserved with salt and chemical additives.



## Dairy

Dairy foods are important sources of protein, calcium and vitamins. Examples include milk, cheese, yoghurt and butter. Eat some dairy foods each day and choose low fat, unsweetened varieties.

## Fat

Our bodies need fat for energy, brain function and as a source of vitamins. We only need small amounts of fat in our diet.

Unsaturated fats are healthier and are found in:

- oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, sardines – aim for at least one portion a week
- smooth nut and seed butters
- nut oils, like walnut oil
- seeds and seed oils, like sesame oil
- olives and olive oil
- avocados

Check food labels and choose foods with 3g or less of total fat per 100g (1.5g fat per 100ml liquid) where possible. These labels are sometimes colour-coded green.

Saturated fats are less healthy. Try to choose foods with 1.5g saturates or less per 100g (0.75g saturates per 100ml liquid). Foods containing saturated fat include fatty or processed meat, cheese, butter, cream, cakes, biscuits and chocolate.

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## Should I take supplements?

You should be able to get all the vitamins and minerals you need from a healthy, balanced diet. But you may need some extra help if there are some foods you can't eat, if you follow a vegan or other restricted diet, or if you have a poor appetite. Ask your healthcare team about seeing a dietitian, who can make sure you're getting all the vitamins and minerals you need.

### Please note

Don't take high doses of supplements as they can be harmful. It is especially important not to take any vitamins or food supplements during your cancer treatment unless they've been recommended by your doctor, dietitian or other qualified healthcare professional.

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# Fibre

Dietary fibre is the part of plant foods that the body can't digest easily, so some of it passes into the bowel without being absorbed. **A diet rich in fibre (wholegrains, pulses, vegetables and fruit) is important for bowel health, as it helps move food more quickly through the bowel and supports good gut bacteria. Fibre also keeps you feeling full for longer, and so can help you control your weight and appetite.**

### Adding fibre to your diet

Increase fibre gradually to avoid wind, bloating and stomach cramps. For example, you could add an extra portion of vegetables to your diet every few days. Fibre attracts water so it's important to drink plenty of fluids like water, low fat milk or herbal teas. Avoid sugary, fizzy and caffeinated drinks.

After treatment, you may find it hard to digest high-fibre foods such as bran, nuts or seeds. Cooking vegetables and fruit and removing the skins can make fibre easier to digest. Over time, you should be able to gradually increase the amount of fibre you eat.

## How much fibre?

Healthy adults should eat at least 30g of fibre a day. Your healthcare team will explain how much fibre you need to include in your diet, depending on which treatment you've had. If you find that you can't cope with high-fibre foods, speak to your dietitian or healthcare team.

## Examples of portion sizes



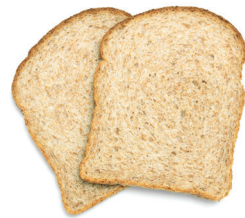
50g bowl of porridge: 5g fibre



One medium apple, pear, orange or banana: 2–4g fibre



Medium baked sweet potato with skin: 4g fibre



Two slices wholemeal bread: 6g fibre



½ avocado: 8g fibre



25g almonds: 3g fibre

## Low-fibre diets

You may need to follow a low-fibre diet, for example before and after treatment. Ask your healthcare team how long you should follow this diet for. You may be able to gradually start eating more fibre after a few weeks.

You may be worried about how you can eat enough vegetables and fruit if you are following a low-fibre diet. You could try:

- fleshy parts of vegetables, such as cucumber, peppers and tomatoes, with the skin and seeds removed
- well-cooked vegetables that are lower in fibre, such as courgettes, squash, carrots, parsnips, swede and sweet potatoes
- lower-fibre fruits such as banana, melon, seedless grapes, and peeled fruits such as apple, pear and peach
- tinned fruit in juice (rather than syrup) with no skin, pith or seeds

- frozen berries that have been defrosted and sieved
- fruit juices – only have one serving each day



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**I made sure I still could have vegetables by removing the skin when cooking and making blended soup for tasty lunches. Don't be afraid to experiment, some things will work and some won't.**

Mike

”



# Eating with a low appetite

Bowel cancer and its treatment can affect how much you are able to eat and drink.

Speak to your GP, specialist nurse or dietitian if you are having problems with eating enough. They can give you emotional support and practical help to eat a balanced diet. If you are a family member or carer and you're worried about someone who has lost their appetite, you can speak to a healthcare professional on their behalf.

You may not have enough help with food shopping or preparing meals or, if you live alone, you may not feel like going to the trouble of cooking for one person.



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**During chemotherapy, I had a horrible taste in my mouth and couldn't eat or drink anything cold. So I always had a packet of mints in the house and a jug of water at room temperature.**

Nicola

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## Tips for boosting appetite

- Fresh air and physical activity before meals can help you feel hungry. Even a short, gentle walk can make a difference
- Eat at similar times each day. Your appetite will start to adjust to these planned meal times, which can help you look forward to meals
- If food smells make you feel sick, try to stay away from the kitchen and ask friends or family to cook. Eating foods that don't need cooking may also help
- Use herbs, spices, pickles and sauces, flavoured olive oils, lemon and lime juice to add flavour to food
- Pre-prepared foods that can be chilled or frozen can be useful if you don't have time to cook or if you aren't able to cook for yourself. Make sure they are reheated properly before eating
- Make large meals that you can eat in smaller portions, such as soup, shepherd's pie or lasagne. This allows you to go back for more if you want to
- If you find that you get full quickly, don't drink anything for half an hour before a meal. Only have small sips during your meal, unless you need liquid to help you swallow. Drink more between meals
- Cook and eat the foods you enjoy in a relaxed environment

# Losing weight safely

**Speak to your healthcare team before trying to lose weight. They can give you information on which types of food you should eat, depending on the treatment you've had and the side effects you're having.**

Following a healthy, balanced diet and eating less can help you lose weight. Regular physical activity also helps. Aim for at least 30 minutes of physical activity, five days a week, and avoid sitting for long periods of time. Gradually build up the amount of activity you do and ask for help from your GP or healthcare team if you need it.

## Get support

Ask your GP to refer you to a dietitian or a weight management programme if you feel you need help to lose weight.

## Tips to help you lose weight

- Start the day with a healthy breakfast like porridge, wholegrain cereals or bread, boiled or poached eggs, lower fat milk and a portion of fruit
- Choose lower fat options where available but remember that many low or non-fat foods contain more sugar
- Replace refined starchy foods such as white bread, white rice and white pasta with wholegrain varieties
- Watch your portion sizes. Even healthy food, such as olive oil and nuts, can make you put on weight if you eat too much
- Avoid snacking between meals unless you are really hungry. Try to avoid sugary snacks and choose healthier options, such as a small portion of nuts and seeds or some carrot sticks and hummus
- Cut back on creamy, fatty or sugary food and drinks – have fruit, vegetables and water instead
- Keep active and eat healthily most days, including weekends and holidays
- When you're exercising, drink water instead of sugary or sports drinks or fruit juice
- Remember that alcohol contains calories. If you drink alcohol, keep your intake as low as possible, with an upper limit of no more than 14 units a week. Try to spread it out over the week and have at least two alcohol free days a week

Some people find it helpful to keep a record of their progress. You could weigh yourself once a week or note down how much you eat and drink and how much physical activity you do.

# Gaining weight safely

## What causes weight loss?

There may be several possible reasons for your weight loss. The cancer itself can affect your appetite. Bowel cancer treatment can cause bowel problems, like constipation and diarrhoea, which can affect your appetite.

Other side effects, like fatigue, a change in your sense of taste and smell, feeling and being sick and emotional stress can also lead to problems with eating. Getting medical advice and treatment for these symptoms may help you to eat more and put on weight.

## Get support

Speak to your GP or healthcare team if you have lost a lot of weight or if you're losing weight quickly. It's important to find out what's causing your weight loss and you may need treatment. If you're finding it hard to put on weight, ask your GP or healthcare team to refer you to a dietitian.

You may be eating normally but still losing weight. The cancer may affect how your body absorbs and uses the nutrients in your food.

## How can I put on weight?

To gain weight safely, you need to eat more calories and keep active.

Eating several small meals a day can help you eat more calories and digest your food more easily than if you eat fewer, larger meals. Try to include energy-rich foods such as nut butter or Greek yogurt to your meal or snacks. You could also try high calorie or 'build up' drinks with added vitamins and minerals. You can buy these over the counter from pharmacies or your dietitian may give you a prescription for them.

Regular gentle physical activity can help build up your muscle strength and may help you feel better about yourself. Ask your GP or healthcare team if they can refer you to a physiotherapist who can help you find activities that are safe to do during and after cancer treatment.

# Managing cancer-related fatigue

**Bowel cancer and its treatment can cause fatigue. This is extreme tiredness that can affect you physically, emotionally and mentally. If you are worried about fatigue, speak to your GP or hospital team. You can also ask them to refer you to a dietitian or physiotherapist for help with diet and exercise.**

## What is fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue is unlike any other kind of tiredness you may have experienced before. It affects your everyday life and isn't relieved by rest, sleep or caffeine. It isn't related to how active you are. It is common in people with bowel cancer, especially during treatment. Fatigue can continue for several months or years after cancer treatment in some people.

Preparing meals can be challenging when you have cancer-related fatigue. Try choosing healthier ready meals or pre-prepared salads. You could cook large dishes when you feel able to, then freeze them in meal-size portions. Ask someone to help you with food shopping or order your groceries online.

# Eating and drinking with a stoma

## Tips for coping with fatigue

- Eat and drink a wide variety of fresh food and liquids to make sure you get all the nutrients you need
- Keep portion sizes small and eat four to six smaller meals or snacks a day. This will help to keep your energy levels steady and stop you feeling hungry
- Ask friends or family to help you prepare food. Making several portions of soups and other meals means you can put some in the fridge or freezer for when you don't feel like cooking
- Boost your iron intake. Good sources of iron include dried apricots, green vegetables, beans, breakfast cereals with added iron and wholegrains. Red meat also contains iron but you should limit how much you eat – read [page 10](#) for more information
- Keep active. Physical activity can help to reduce fatigue and help you cope with treatment
- Keep to a regular bedtime routine
- Eat a light snack and have a caffeine-free milky or herbal drink before bed to avoid waking up hungry or thirsty in the night
- Take any prescribed painkillers just before going to sleep if you find that you tend to wake in the night with pain

**A stoma is where a section of bowel is brought out through an opening on your stomach area (abdomen). Your poo (output) is collected in a pouch or bag attached to the skin around your stoma. There are two types of stoma – a colostomy is formed from the large bowel and an ileostomy is formed from the small bowel.**

When you leave hospital, your healthcare team should give you information on diet. Try to eat a balanced, healthy diet and drink six to eight glasses of liquid a day.

For the first two months after surgery, your bowel will be swollen so you will need to chew your food well. You may find it helps to eat five or six smaller meals a day instead of three larger ones.

Through trial and error, you will find which types of food you can and can't eat. The food and symptoms diary on [page 39](#) can help you with this.

If you have your stoma reversed, it can take several weeks or months for your bowel symptoms to settle down. You may have more frequent or more urgent bowel motions, constipation or loose, runny poo (diarrhoea). You can read about how diet can help with diarrhoea and constipation on [pages 27 and 31](#).

Your healthcare team can offer support and treatment for bowel problems after stoma reversal surgery.

## More information

Find out more about stomas on our website at [bowelcanceruk.org.uk](http://bowelcanceruk.org.uk)

## Colostomy

Many people with a colostomy are able to eat a healthy, balanced diet. But if you had constipation or diarrhoea before having a colostomy, you may find that you continue to have these symptoms.

You may find that some types of food give you bowel problems like wind or loose output. Cutting back on these types of food can help with symptoms.

To prevent constipation, drink six to eight glasses of liquid a day. Water is best but you can also have tea, coffee or sugar-free squash. Limit fruit juice to one glass a day. Make sure you're eating enough fibre and have at least five portions of vegetables and fruit each day. For the first few days after surgery, make sure vegetables are well cooked. You may cope better with cooked, rather than raw, fruit.

If you have constipation, make sure you're eating regular meals to keep your stoma working. Food that is spicy or high in fibre can help to relieve constipation. If you want to eat more fibre, introduce it to your diet gradually and make sure you're drinking enough liquid. Read [pages 13 and 31](#) for more information on fibre and constipation.

If you have diarrhoea, see your GP or stoma nurse. They may give you medicine to slow the movement of food through your bowel and thicken the output. You can read more about diarrhoea on [page 27](#). Foods that may thicken output include very ripe bananas, boiled rice, porridge, smooth peanut butter, white bread or pasta.

## Ileostomy

When you first have an ileostomy, you may find that some types of food are harder to digest. Chew your food well and introduce fibre gradually. Avoid fruit straight after surgery, except for bananas which thicken the output from your stoma. Gradually introduce cooked fruit, like stewed apple.

After six to eight weeks, you should be able to start eating more types of food. You can eat vegetables and fruit as part of a healthy, balanced diet, but chew them well to reduce the risk of blockages. If you have problems eating these foods, you could try taking off the skin and removing the seeds or eating tinned vegetables and fruit in natural juice or water.

### Important

Get medical help from your GP or hospital emergency department if you start being sick (vomiting) or if the pain doesn't get better.

A blockage can cause pain in your stomach area (abdomen) and bloating. You may feel sick and your stoma may stop working. These symptoms should settle if you:

- keep drinking liquids
- stop eating solid food
- don't use laxatives
- cut the opening of your stoma appliance slightly larger, as your stoma may swell
- massage your stomach area (abdomen) and around the stoma
- try a warm bath to ease pain in your stomach area

The output from your stoma may change throughout the day. Some people say their output is thicker in the morning or after meals.

To prevent dehydration, drink about eight glasses of non-caffeinated liquids a day.



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**When I get pain in my side by my stoma and I think I may have a blockage, I lie on my back with my knees bent and gently move my knees from side to side whilst massaging my side. This helps enormously and sometimes works straight away.**

Helen

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Eating lots of small, hard foods like raisins, nuts and sweetcorn can irritate the stoma site if they get stuck. Some people find they can't eat these types of food long-term.

You may sometimes get an increased output. Possible causes include stomach bugs, stress, antibiotics, spicy food, beer or lager. Carry on drinking water as usual to replace the extra liquid you're losing. Eat salty foods to replace the salts lost in the output and avoid foods that increase output, like fruit, vegetables, fried foods, fruit juice, caffeine and alcohol. To thicken the output eat bread, rice, potatoes, pasta, oats, smooth nut butter, bananas and crackers.

If you have increased output over a long period of time, if you feel thirsty or faint, or if you have dark yellow urine, tell your stoma nurse. These can be signs of a high-output stoma which can cause dehydration.

## How can diet help with bowel problems?

**Your bowel habits will have changed after treatment and you may have symptoms such as diarrhoea, constipation and wind. These symptoms may improve after a few months, but some people have longer-term changes.**

### Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea is loose, runny poo that you pass more often than normal. You may need to rush to the toilet several times a day.

#### What causes diarrhoea?

Bowel cancer treatments, such as surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy can cause diarrhoea. Other possible causes include medicines, like antibiotics, and infections.

Some people may have symptoms of diarrhoea when they have constipation. This may seem confusing and you may wonder why your doctor is treating your diarrhoea with laxatives. But if your poo is blocking your bowel, runny poo can leak through and can look like diarrhoea. Your doctor will work with you to find out what is causing your diarrhoea so you can get the right treatment. You can read more about constipation on [page 31](#).

### Avoiding dehydration

When you have diarrhoea, you need to drink enough liquid to avoid getting dehydrated. Take regular small sips and aim for at least six to eight glasses of liquid a day. Avoid sugary or fizzy drinks and drinks that contain caffeine, like tea and coffee, as these can irritate the bowel and make diarrhoea worse.

As well as losing water, you will be losing salts and other important nutrients. To replace these, try eating fresh or tinned soups and broths. You could also have Marmite on toast or plain crackers.

If you feel too sick to eat, or if you become very dehydrated, your GP may suggest you use oral rehydration salts. These contain a balance of salts and sugars to help your body re-absorb them quickly. You can buy them from pharmacies and supermarkets.

## What should I eat?

Light, bland and easily digested foods can help with diarrhoea after bowel cancer treatment. Try cutting back on high-fibre foods, like wholemeal bread, bran-based cereals and brown rice, especially in the first few weeks and months after surgery and radiotherapy. You can read more about fibre on [page 13](#).

Try to eat small amounts regularly throughout the day and eat slowly to avoid bloating and wind. Tell your healthcare team if you're having trouble eating or if eating plain food doesn't improve your symptoms. If you're not able to get enough nutrients from your food, your healthcare team may refer you to a dietitian.

It may take you a while to find out which foods make your symptoms better or worse. You may find that your body reacts differently to foods that you couldn't eat in the past. It's always worth trying these foods again to see how you react to them. You can keep a record of how you react to different types of food on [page 39](#).

Probiotics may help to reduce the length and frequency of diarrhoea caused by infection. There is also some evidence that probiotics may help with diarrhoea caused by radiotherapy or chemotherapy but more evidence is needed. You may not be able to take probiotics during chemotherapy or if you have low levels of white blood cells because they can increase the risk of infection.

### Remember

Always speak to your healthcare team before taking probiotics.

Suggestions for food and drink to try and what to avoid if you have diarrhoea.

### ✓ Food and drink to try

- Water
- Bananas
- White rice
- Pasta
- Noodles
- White bread or toast
- Crackers
- Low-fibre cereals like puffed rice or cornflakes
- Skinned chicken
- White fish
- Hard boiled eggs

### ✗ Food and drink to avoid

- Drinks containing caffeine
- Alcohol
- Milk and other dairy products
- Fatty foods
- Raw vegetables and fruit
- Beans
- Spicy food
- High-fibre cereals like porridge oats and bran
- An artificial sweetener called sorbitol, found in sugar-free sweets and drinks

## Diarrhoea medicines

Tell your doctor about any medicines and nutritional supplements you're already taking. They may suggest you stop taking any medicines that may be making your diarrhoea worse.

Always speak to your doctor before taking any medicines for diarrhoea. They will need to find out what is causing your symptoms before deciding on the best treatment for you.

Your doctor may offer you medicines that slow down the movement of the large bowel, such as loperamide or codeine phosphate. They will give you information on how and when to take these drugs.

If your bowel cancer treatment is likely to cause diarrhoea, your doctor may give you diarrhoea medicine to keep at home in case you need it. If you're having chemotherapy or chemoradiotherapy, your doctor may give you a medicine called octreotide to treat diarrhoea caused by your cancer treatment. Contact your healthcare team if you have any questions about how to take your medicines.

## Where can I get more help?

Your healthcare team and GP can tell you about products and local services that can help you cope with diarrhoea.

### More support

You can also contact Bladder and Bowel UK for information on products to help you cope at home and when you go out.

The Pelvic Radiation Disease Association provides information on diarrhoea and other bowel problems caused by pelvic radiation disease.

You can find their contact details on [pages 40 and 41](#).

## Constipation

Constipation is when your poo is hard, dry and difficult to pass. You may find it painful when you go to the toilet or you may feel like your bowel isn't completely empty.

There is no rule for how often you should be having a poo – some people go more than once a day and others go every three to four days. Both of these are normal but if you are going to the toilet less often than you normally do, you may have constipation.

Speak to your GP or healthcare team if you think you have constipation.

### Please note

Get medical advice straight away if you haven't had a poo for more than a few days and you have pain, feel sick or have been sick (vomited).

## What causes constipation?

Many things can cause constipation, including:

- bowel surgery
- medicines, like opioid painkillers
- other illnesses, like diabetes, thyroid problems or depression
- not eating enough fibre
- not drinking enough liquid
- lack of exercise



## What should I eat and drink?

Always speak to your GP or healthcare team before making big changes to your diet. If you've had constipation for a long time, you may need medical treatment before you change your diet.

- Eat at least three meals each day. Try not to skip meals
- Unless you can't tolerate fibre, increase the amount of fibre in your diet, especially wholegrains. Do this gradually and in small portions to avoid wind and bloating
- Choose more raw fruits and vegetables and eat the skin, if you can
- Drink plenty of fluids, especially water

High-fibre foods need to be soft, well-cooked and well-chewed. If you're increasing the amount of fibre in your diet, make sure you also

drink more liquid. Be careful not to overdo it – eating too much fibre can make constipation worse. It can take up to four weeks for you to see any change in your bowel habit. You can find out more about fibre on [page 13](#).

## Foods that may help

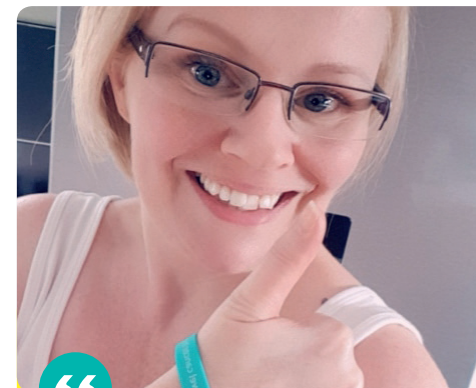
- Wholegrain bread, rice, pasta and breakfast cereals
- Porridge oats
- Fresh, tinned or dried fruit that is high in a natural laxative called sorbitol. For example, prunes, raisins, plums, grapes, peaches, raspberries, strawberries, apricots, apples or pears
- Fruit juices high in sorbitol, such as prune juice
- Vegetables
- Peas, beans and lentils
- Ground flaxseeds/golden linseeds

## Other options to try

- Avoiding sitting down for long periods of time
- Regular gentle physical activity for at least 150 minutes a week, for at least 10 minutes at a time
- Making sure you have enough time and somewhere private to go to the toilet, if possible
- Sitting in a squatting position on the toilet, with your knees bent and your feet on a stool. This can help you use the right muscles to empty your bowel
- Not putting off going to the toilet
- Firmly massaging your stomach area in a clockwise movement can help get your bowel moving and can ease bloating and wind

## Where can I get more help?

Your GP or healthcare team can give you medicine to help with constipation. They may give you stool softeners for hard poo that is difficult to pass or laxatives for a slow bowel habit. Only take these under medical guidance.



“

**In the morning, I have a medium-sized glass of prune juice on an empty stomach. It works wonders and if my body is being stubborn I repeat the next morning.**

Sadie

”

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## Wind

Everyone passes wind. Although this can be embarrassing, it is normal. You may pass wind through your mouth (belching) or through your back passage (flatulence). Speak to your GP or healthcare team if you are having a lot of wind or pain in your stomach area.

### What causes wind?

Bacteria are present in everyone's large bowel. They produce wind as they break down the food you eat. But sometimes you may have too much wind or trapped wind. This can make you feel bloated, full, sick or uncomfortable. You may get shooting pains in your stomach area (abdomen) or pains that come and go (colic). If you have a stoma, you won't be able to control when you pass wind into your stoma bag.

You may also get wind and other bowel problems after bowel cancer treatment, such as radiotherapy, surgery or chemotherapy.

Swallowing air when you eat or drink can cause wind. You may swallow too much air if you eat quickly or talk while you eat. Some people swallow air as a nervous habit or if they have a problem with stomach acid.

If you have constipation, food can sit in your large bowel for longer, which can cause wind. You can find out more about constipation on [page 31](#).

You may find that some types of food and drink cause more wind. You can use the food and symptoms diary on [page 39](#) to help you find out what is causing the problem.

If you think you know what food is causing your wind, you could try eating less of it to see if that helps. You could also change the way you eat it. For example, if raw vegetables are causing wind, you could try eating them cooked instead. Don't cut out whole groups of food or make big changes to your diet without speaking to a dietitian.

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## Food and drinks that can cause wind in some people include:

- beans and pulses, like lentils and peas
- some vegetables, including broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, onions, asparagus, cucumbers, garlic, leeks, mushrooms, sweetcorn
- fructose, found naturally in fruit and also in some processed foods
- sorbitol and mannitol, which are sweeteners found in sugar-free sweets, chewing gum and some chocolate
- fatty foods
- fruit juices, if you drink more than one glass a day
- sparkling water and fizzy drinks
- wine and beer

The types of food that cause smelly wind vary from person to person, but may include fish, onions, garlic, eggs, cheese, asparagus and baked beans.

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## How can diet help?

- Avoid missing meals. Have a snack and drink if there's a long gap between meals
- Sit up straight when you're eating and try to avoid lying down during the day
- Take your time when you're eating and drinking to avoid swallowing too much air
- Make sure you're drinking enough fluid, but avoid fizzy drinks
- Avoid chewing gum and sucking on boiled sweets, as these make you swallow more than usual
- If you are trying to eat more fibre, add it to your diet gradually. Eating too much in one go can cause wind and can make constipation worse
- Drinking peppermint tea can help to reduce wind

- Eating oats and linseeds (also called flaxseeds) can help with wind and bloating. Try oat-based breakfast cereals or porridge. Add up to one tablespoon of ground or milled linseeds (not linseed oil, which doesn't contain fibre) to your meals each day. You will need to add more liquid to your meal when you use linseeds
- Probiotic supplements may help with wind and bloating. Take the dose recommended by the manufacturer and take them for at least four weeks to see if they are helping. If you eat probiotic yoghurts, check that they don't contain artificial sweeteners as these can cause wind. **Always check with your healthcare team before taking probiotics and don't take them during cancer treatment**

### What else can I do to reduce wind?

Keep active. Regular gentle physical activity can help prevent constipation and reduce wind. Avoid using drinking straws and don't smoke as these make you swallow more air than usual.

## Can diet help prevent bowel cancer coming back?

**We don't yet know how to stop bowel cancer coming back after treatment. There's some suggestion that these things may help reduce your risk of cancer coming back but we need more evidence before we can say this for sure:**

- staying a healthy weight
- being physically active for at least 30 minutes a day, and sitting less
- avoiding high calorie food and sugary drinks
- eating more whole grains, vegetables, fruit and beans
- limiting red meat and avoiding processed meat
- avoiding alcohol if possible. If you do drink alcohol, drink no more than 14 units a week and spread it out over the week

Making healthy lifestyle choices is good for your overall health and can prevent or reduce other health problems, like diabetes and heart disease.

### More support

Speak to your GP or healthcare team if you have any worries about your diet or your ability to keep physically active. They may refer you to another health professional, such as a dietitian or physiotherapist.

# Getting professional support

## Do I need to see a specialist?

Ask to see a dietitian if you have:

- type 1 diabetes
- a long-term health condition that affects what you can eat, such as type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, gall stones, diverticulitis, coeliac disease or inflammatory bowel disease
- food allergies or sensitivities
- unintended weight loss
- side effects of treatment that affect your ability to eat, such as sickness, diarrhoea, fatigue or mouth sores

A physiotherapist can help if you have extreme tiredness (fatigue) or a physically demanding job. Physiotherapists can also help with other problems caused by bowel cancer and its treatment. For example, if surgery has caused you to lose full control of your bowel, they can teach you pelvic floor exercises that may help.

## Health and wellbeing events

Some hospitals offer Health and Wellbeing events where you can get information on managing your health and wellbeing after cancer treatment. This may include information on diet and lifestyle. You may also have the chance to meet other people in a similar position to you.

Some hospitals also offer holistic needs assessments, which aim to find out what practical or physical needs you have. Your healthcare team may refer you to other local services if you need them. Your specialist nurse can tell you if these events or assessments are available at your hospital.

# More information

## Food and symptoms diary

Keeping a diary of food and symptoms can help you find out which foods you react to. Include the amount of food you eat as well as how long any reactions last. You may get symptoms up to a day after you eat the food. You can download copies of this diary from [bowelcanceruk.org.uk](http://bowelcanceruk.org.uk)

Date/Time	Food/drink/medicines taken	How much	What was the symptom/reaction?	How long did it last?

# Other useful organisations

## Bladder and Bowel UK

**W** [bbuk.org.uk](http://bbuk.org.uk)  
**T** 0161 607 8219

UK charity for people with bladder and bowel control problems.

## British Dietetic Association

**W** [bda.uk.com](http://bda.uk.com)

Provides information on healthy eating and how to find a dietitian.

## Cancer Research UK

**W** [cancerresearchuk.org](http://cancerresearchuk.org)  
**T** 0808 800 4040

Information for people affected by cancer. You can speak to an information nurse by calling their helpline.

## Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

**W** [csp.org.uk](http://csp.org.uk)

For information on what physiotherapy is and a searchable list of qualified physiotherapists.

## Colostomy UK

**W** [colostomyuk.org](http://colostomyuk.org)  
**T** 0800 328 4257

Provides support, reassurance and practical information to anyone who has or is about to have a colostomy.

## Food Standards Agency

**W** [food.gov.uk](http://food.gov.uk)

For information on the Eatwell guide.

## IA (Ileostomy and Internal Pouch Support Group)

**W** [iasupport.org](http://iasupport.org)  
**T** 0800 018 4724

A support group run by and for people with ileostomies and internal pouches.

## Macmillan Cancer Support

**W** [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)  
**T** 0808 808 0000

Provides support and information for people with cancer, including information on diet and recipes.

## NHS

**W** [nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk)

The UK's biggest health website.

## NHS Direct Wales

**W** [nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)

NHS health information for Wales.

## NHS Inform

**W** [nhsinform.scot](http://nhsinform.scot)

Health information for people living in Scotland.

## nidirect

**W** [nidirect.gov.uk](http://nidirect.gov.uk)

Government website for Northern Ireland citizens. Includes information on health and wellbeing.

## Pelvic Radiation Disease Association

**W** [prda.org.uk](http://prda.org.uk)  
**T** 01372 744 338

Information and support for people with pelvic radiation disease.

## Penny Brohn UK

**W** [pennybrohn.org.uk](http://pennybrohn.org.uk)  
**T** 0303 3000 118

Helps people live well with cancer by offering a range of free services, including information, courses and demonstrations on healthy eating and cooking.

## World Cancer Research Fund

**W** [wcrf-uk.org](http://wcrf-uk.org)

Promotes scientific research on cancer prevention and survival through diet, weight and physical activity to help people make informed lifestyle choices.



Bowel Cancer UK is the UK's leading bowel cancer charity. We're determined to save lives and improve the quality of life of everyone affected by the disease.

We support and fund targeted research, provide expert information and support to patients and their families, educate the public and professionals about bowel cancer and campaign for early diagnosis and access to best treatment and care.

**To donate or find out more visit**  
**[bowelcanceruk.org.uk](http://bowelcanceruk.org.uk)**

 [/bowelcanceruk](https://www.facebook.com/bowelcanceruk)

 [@bowelcanceruk](https://twitter.com/bowelcanceruk)

Please contact us if you have any comments about the information in this booklet: [feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk](mailto:feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk)



Certified member

This organisation has been certified as a producer of reliable health and social care information.

[www.theinformationstandard.org](http://www.theinformationstandard.org)

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