

Appetite Loss

■ What is appetite loss?

Loss of appetite is a common symptom in people with cancer and a side effect of cancer treatment. People with poor appetite or appetite loss may eat less than usual, have no feelings of hunger, or feel full after eating only a small amount. Ongoing appetite loss may lead to weight loss, malnutrition, and fatigue and weakness from muscle loss.

■ What causes appetite loss?

Many types of cancer, including ovarian, pancreatic, and stomach cancers, may cause a loss of appetite because they affect a person's metabolism. Other types of cancer may enlarge the spleen or liver so it pushes on the stomach, creating a feeling of fullness. Ascites, a buildup of fluid in the abdomen, may also create a feeling of fullness. In addition, poor appetite may result from specific medications or treatments, such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or surgery to any part of the gastrointestinal tract, such as the stomach or intestines. Other side effects of cancer treatment, such as nausea and vomiting, mouth sores, difficulty swallowing, taste changes, and depression, may cause appetite loss.



■ How is appetite loss diagnosed?

There is no test that can diagnose poor appetite. Let your doctor know if you experience appetite loss. Your doctor will likely do a physical examination to check for anything unusual and ask you questions about the severity of your appetite loss, how long you have been experiencing appetite loss, how much weight you have lost, and any other symptoms you are experiencing. Your doctor may also recommend tests to check for health conditions that could cause poor appetite.

■ How is appetite loss treated?

If possible, the first step in treating appetite loss is to address the underlying cause. Treatment for conditions such as mouth sores, dry mouth, pain, or depression should help improve appetite. Additional treatments for appetite loss and associated weight loss may include medications that increase appetite, medications that help food move through the intestines, nutritional supplement drinks, and tube feeding. Dietary supplements, such as multivitamins, may also be appropriate for people with cancer who are not able to get all of their nutrients through food. Because high doses of specific nutrient supplements can be harmful, it is important to talk with your doctor if you plan to take individual supplements.

Sometimes, despite best efforts, people with cancer continue to have appetite loss that may lead to weight loss. This is more common in people with advanced stage or incurable cancer. Appetite loss can be emotionally distressing to both the person with cancer and their caregivers. It can create feelings of helplessness and guilt. If this happens, it is important to remember that appetite loss is no one's fault, and forcing a person with cancer to eat when they have little or no appetite can increase distress.

Ask your health care team for tips to help you get the calories and nutrients your body needs and to maintain a healthy weight, even when your appetite is poor. They may ask you to keep a food diary for a few days to help them create the best plan for you. Your health care team may also recommend that you meet with a registered dietitian for dietary counseling to help you accomplish these goals.

Questions to ask the health care team

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. It can be helpful to bring someone along to your appointments to take notes. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- ▶ What could be the underlying cause of my appetite loss?
- ▶ Could my cancer or cancer treatment cause appetite loss?
- ▶ Should I be concerned about the amount of weight I have lost?
- ▶ What options do I have to treat the underlying cause of my appetite loss?
- ▶ How can I make sure I get the nutrients I need while maintaining a healthy weight?
- ▶ Are there any other treatments that would increase my appetite or address my weight loss?
- ▶ Would you recommend meeting with a registered dietitian for help with my appetite loss?
- ▶ Would you recommend taking a dietary supplement? If so, how much should I take and for how long?
- ▶ What are the benefits, risks, and possible side effects of taking this dietary supplement?
- ▶ Could taking dietary supplements interfere with my cancer treatment?
- ▶ If I have a question or problem, who should I call?

Find more information about appetite loss and other side effects at www.cancer.net/sideeffects. For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

Words to know

Anorexia: Loss of appetite.

Cachexia: The combination of weight loss and muscle mass loss, also called wasting.

Calorie: A measure of energy in food that the body can use to function.

Dietary supplement: A product taken by mouth to provide vitamins, minerals, or other nutrients missing from a person's diet.

Dysgeusia: A change in the sense of taste.

Malnutrition: A condition that occurs when a person does not get nutrients from food that the body needs.

Metabolism: The process of the body breaking down food and turning it into energy.

Multivitamin: A dietary supplement that typically contains many different vitamins, minerals, and trace elements.

Nutrient: A substance in food that provides the body with the materials it needs to function.

Registered dietitian: A food and nutrition professional.

Palliative care: The relief of side effects, also called supportive care.

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