

Appetite Loss

What is appetite loss?

Loss of appetite is a common symptom of cancer and 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?

Some types of cancer, including ovarian, pancreatic, and stomach cancer, may cause a loss of appetite by affecting 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 receiving specific medications or from 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, difficulty swallowing, taste changes, and depression, may also cause appetite loss.



How is appetite loss diagnosed?

There is no test that can diagnose poor appetite. 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. In addition, the doctor may 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 intestine, 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.

Ask your health care team for tips to help you get the calories and nutrients your body needs and maintain a healthy weight, even when your appetite is poor. Your health care team may 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 for making informed decisions about your health care. 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 establishing a healthy diet?
- Would you recommend taking a dietary supplement? If so, how much should I take and for how long?
- What are the benefits, risks, and side effects of taking this dietary supplement?
- Could taking dietary supplements interfere with my cancer treatment?
- Whom should I call with questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

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.

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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 all of the required daily 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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