



Eating well

Eating well with and
beyond bowel cancer



Bowel CancerUK
Beating bowel cancer together

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Patient Information Forum

We're accredited as a Trusted Information Creator by the Patient Information Forum. This means the way we write our resources has been independently assessed as health information you can trust.

About this booklet

This booklet is for anyone who is being treated for bowel cancer. It may also be helpful for your family and friends.

It has information on how your diet can affect and improve your symptoms before, during and after treatment. We've also included some personal experiences of how people have managed their diet during and after bowel cancer treatment. Their experiences may help you understand and manage your own symptoms during and after treatment.

You don't have to read the whole booklet or read the booklet in the order its written. This booklet is for you, to help you learn what to eat and drink to help manage your symptoms. Throughout, we will offer guidance on where you can find more information and support. We've included a food and symptoms diary on **page 45**, to help you identify how different foods may affect you.

You can also find information on the different food groups that make up a healthy balanced diet. At the end of the booklet, we provide contact details for Bowel Cancer UK and other useful organisations and have explained what some of the words used in this booklet mean.

Get in touch

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

What is a balanced diet?

A healthy balanced diet can give you more energy and help you feel your best. It may also help your recovery after cancer treatment.

A balanced diet usually involves eating many different types of food in the right amounts. The right amounts for you will depend on your age, weight, gender and how active you are. You may find that the foods you can eat change before, during and after your cancer treatment. Your healthcare team should be able to help you identify the best foods and drinks for you at different stages of your treatment.

A balanced diet includes:

- at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- starchy foods such as bread, pasta, rice and potatoes
- protein, such as meat, fish, eggs or pulses each day
- dairy or non-dairy alternatives like milk, yoghurt, cheese, or plant-based milk with added calcium
- fats like oils and spreads

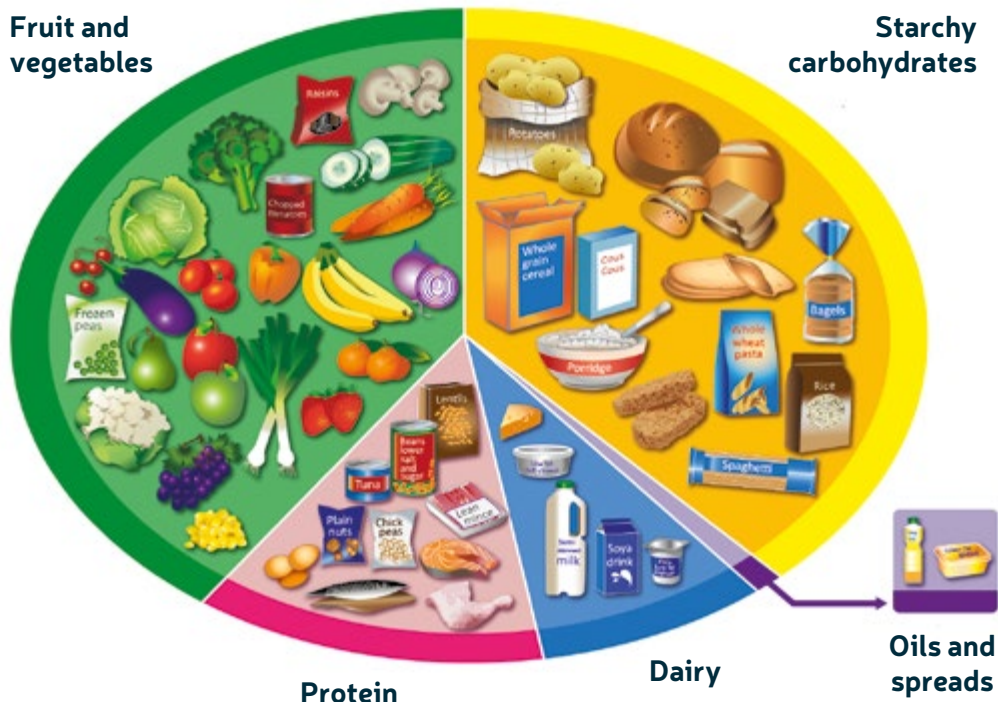
You can find more information on these food groups on **pages 46–55**.

At the same time, you should try to drink six to eight glasses of fluid each day. Water is best but if you struggle to drink enough, you could try drinking sugar-free squash, tea or coffee instead. You could also try eating food that contains water, such as soup or melon.

If you drink alcohol, you should ask your healthcare team for advice on drinking with bowel cancer. That way they can provide you with information specific to you and your treatment. They may suggest that you stop drinking alcohol or reduce how much you drink.

The diagram below recommends how much of each of these food types to include in your diet. While this information is useful as a general guide, you may have different dietary needs because of your specific symptoms and treatment. This means that what is a 'healthy diet' for you may change at different stages of treatment and beyond.

The Eatwell Guide



Remember that this is general information and may need to be tailored to suit your needs.

Eating and drinking well with cancer can be difficult. Your healthcare team and dietitian are there to support you through this.

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

Remember

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



Supplements

You should be able to get all the vitamins and minerals you need from a healthy balanced diet.

If there are foods you can't eat, if you follow a vegan or other restricted diet, or if you have a poor appetite, you may need a little extra help getting the vitamins and minerals that your body needs.

Always double check with your healthcare team to find out if supplementing certain nutrients works for your condition. High doses of supplements may be harmful. This means it is important to only take vitamins or food supplements that have been recommended by your healthcare team or dietitian.

More information

If you would like further advice, you can contact one of our nurses using this link:
bowelcanceruk.org.uk/nurse



Food hygiene

Having good food hygiene is very important when you have cancer. This is because cancer and its treatment can weaken your immune system. This can put you at higher risk of food poisoning and other infections.

Good food hygiene is the best way to reduce your risk of infection.

Our tips for good food hygiene include:

- washing your hands before cooking and eating
- cleaning your cooking utensils and worktops thoroughly – especially after preparing meat and eggs
- regularly washing or replacing dishcloths, sponges and tea towels
- keeping pets out of the kitchen
- using fresh ingredients
- storing your food and drink according to the instructions on the packaging, and throwing away any mouldy or out-of-date food
- washing all fruit and vegetables in cold running water
- if cooking extra portions, letting cooked food cool completely then storing it in the fridge or freezer
- only reheating pre-cooked food once – except for rice, which should be eaten as soon as it is cooked
- eating your food before the best before and use by dates
- making sure your food is cooked properly and hot all the way through

Following good food hygiene may be enough to protect you from infections.

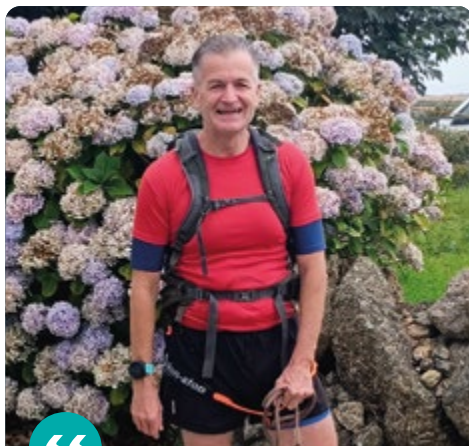
If your immunity is very low your healthcare team will suggest you don't eat certain foods.

Foods that should be avoided if your immunity is very low are:

- products containing raw or undercooked meats, poultry, fish or shellfish
- products with raw or undercooked eggs
- products containing probiotics, such as some yoghurts
- products made from unpasteurised milk, like some cheeses

If your immunity is low, you might want to avoid eating out or having takeaway food.

Foods from salad bars, buffets, street vendors and ice cream vans are high risk. This is because you can't tell how fresh the food is, or how well it has been prepared. If you do eat out, it is best to choose a place where you know the food will be freshly prepared and prepared properly.



“

I washed my fruit and vegetables very carefully to reduce the risk of infection and removed the peel to prevent any blockages.

Nick

”

Before surgery

Eating a healthy balanced diet can help you recover from surgery more quickly.

Foods high in protein, such as chicken, fish and eggs, can help your body heal and lower the risk of wound infection. If you're vegan, you can get protein from lentils, soya products, tofu, beans, nuts and seeds.

Fibre-rich carbohydrates, such as wholegrain bread, rice and pasta, are a good source of energy.

You should also try to keep hydrated in the lead up to your surgery.

Water is usually recommended for up to two hours before your surgery. Your healthcare team may also give you electrolyte supplements. Drinking fluid can help reduce the risk of complications after surgery.

To reduce the risk of complications, you might be advised to avoid alcohol for at least four weeks before your surgery.

Many hospitals have an enhanced recovery programme which have different names, such as **Enhanced Recovery After Surgery (ERAS)**.

This can help you recover from surgery more quickly and reduce the risks of complications. You may be given carbohydrate-rich drinks for a few days before and after your operation. These drinks may shorten your hospital stay and can help with healing and recovery after surgery.



“ I focused on eating simple, nourishing meals that were easy to digest but still full of nutrients, like choosing well-cooked vegetables and soups. I tried to keep my meals balanced and anti-inflammatory by including colourful vegetables, olive oil, fish and eggs. ”

Leanne

After surgery

Some people have a stoma after surgery. This 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. Stomas can be temporary or permanent. There are two types of stoma – a colostomy, which is formed from the large bowel and an ileostomy, which is formed from the small bowel.

When you leave hospital, your stoma care nurse should give you information on diet. You might be advised to follow a low fibre diet while your bowel heals. Healing generally takes around six to eight weeks.

You can read more about a low fibre diet on [page 18](#).

When things have settled, it is important to start re-introducing foods back into your diet gradually in small portions.

You should follow the personalised advice of your dietitian and your healthcare team as they know your specific needs well.

Tips for eating and drinking well with a stoma:

- try to eat a balanced, healthy diet
- chew your food well, to prevent your stoma getting blocked
- you may prefer to eat five or six smaller meals a day instead of three larger ones
- try using the food and symptoms diary on [page 45](#) to help you identify which foods to avoid
- make sure you're drinking enough fluids

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 movements, hard and dry poo that is difficult to pass (constipation) or loose, runny poo (diarrhoea). You can read about how diet can help with diarrhoea and constipation on [pages 26 and 32](#).

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)



“ I had to make sure that I drank a lot of water, especially sports drinks that contained electrolytes, and kept an eye on my salt intake. I introduced new foods slowly and ate little and often.

Nick

”

Colostomy

Many people with a colostomy are able to eat a healthy balanced diet. This also means you should be able to enjoy some of your favourite foods again.

You may find that some types of food give you bowel symptoms such as wind or loose poo. Cutting back on these types of food can help, although you should not restrict foods unnecessarily.

To avoid over-restricting your diet, you could re-try foods after a few months that caused problems earlier on. You might find your bowel has adapted and settled down.

Important

You should contact your healthcare team or stoma care nurse if you are experiencing ongoing problems and need advice.



If you had constipation or diarrhoea before having a colostomy, you may find that you continue to have these symptoms.

Constipation can be uncomfortable. If you have constipation, make sure you're eating regular meals to keep your stoma working. Food that is spicy or high in fibre may help to relieve constipation. If you want to eat more fibre, re-introduce it into your diet gradually and make sure you're drinking enough fluids.

Read [page 53](#) for more information on fibre and [page 32](#) for additional information on constipation.

If you have diarrhoea, speak to your stoma care nurse. They may give you medicine to slow the movement of food through your bowel and thicken the output.

You could also try eating foods that may thicken your poo, such as:

- very ripe bananas
- boiled rice
- porridge
- smooth peanut butter
- white bread or pasta

You can read more about diarrhoea on [**page 26**](#).

Contact your stoma care nurse or call 111 if there are any signs that your colostomy isn't working properly, such as:

- watery poo or not passing many poos
- stomach cramps and bloating
- feeling or being sick (nausea or vomiting)
- a swollen colostomy



“

I kept a food diary to help keep track of the foods that I introduced and whether they agreed with me or not. This helped me remember any reactions I had. I found that I had to avoid food and drinks with artificial sweeteners.'

Pete

”

Ileostomy

You may find that some foods are harder to digest after an ileostomy. It is important to follow a low fibre diet after having an ileostomy while your bowel heals.

You can find more information on low fibre diets on [page 18](#). You should also avoid foods and drinks that can irritate, such as spicy food or drinks that contain caffeine.

After six to eight weeks, you should be able to start gradually eating more types of food. With time you should be able to eat a healthy balanced diet. This also means you should be able to enjoy some of your favourite foods again.

Your healthcare team can help you if you're unsure about re-introducing certain foods back into your diet.

Tips for eating and drinking with an ileostomy include:

- chewing your food well – especially fruit, vegetables and small hard foods like raisins, nuts and sweetcorn
- choosing decaffeinated drinks
- sipping plenty of fluid throughout the day – ideally eight to ten cups to prevent dehydration
- adding salt to your meals
- trying isotonic sports drinks, or oral rehydration solutions if you are dehydrated

You may sometimes get an increased output of poo from your ileostomy. Possible causes include stomach infections, dehydration, stress, antibiotics, spicy food, beer or lager.

If your output has increased here are some things you can do to help:

- carry on drinking water as usual to keep yourself hydrated – aim for six to eight glasses a day
- if you're able to, eat salty foods or add a little salt to your meals to replace the salts lost in loose poo. If you have high blood pressure, heart or kidney problems, check with your stoma care nurse first
- cut back on foods that increase the amount of poo you pass, such as fruit, vegetables, fried foods, fruit juice, caffeine and alcohol
- thicken the output by eating bread, rice, potatoes, pasta, oats, smooth nut butter, bananas and crackers

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

If your ileostomy stops working, you may have a blockage. This can cause pain the stomach area (abdomen) and you may feel sick. Contact your stoma care nurse for advice.

They may suggest that you:

- keep drinking fluids
- stop eating solid food
- don't use laxatives
- make the opening of your stoma appliance slightly larger if your stoma swells
- massage your stomach area (abdomen) and around the stoma
- try a warm bath to ease pain in your abdomen
- go to the hospital emergency department if you haven't passed any poo or wind from your ileostomy for more than six hours

Important

Get medical help from your hospital emergency department straight away if your abdomen area is very painful and bloated and you start being sick (vomiting). Your bowel may be blocked, and you might need treatment quickly.

Low fibre diet

Your healthcare team may advise you to follow a low fibre diet. This could be before, during and after treatment.

You can read more about eating and drinking after surgery on [**page 12–17**](#).

Ask your healthcare team how long you should follow this diet for. A few weeks after your surgery, they may suggest that you gradually start eating more fibre. You may be worried about how you can eat enough vegetables and fruit if you are following a low fibre diet. Your healthcare team will give you advice.

You could try foods containing soluble fibre, which is easier to digest, such as:

- 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 – try not to have more one serving of these each day, as fruit juice is high in sugar

Your healthcare team may also suggest taking a multi-vitamin and mineral supplement to make sure you are able to get the nutrients you need.



“ I made sure that my vegetables were well cooked and I peeled the skin off so I could still enjoy a healthy low fibre diet. I also asked my stoma nurses for advice, and they were very helpful. ”

Sana

During treatment

Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy can affect what you eat and drink in many ways.

Treatment may affect your appetite and make you feel or be sick. These symptoms can make it harder for you to eat or drink. Treatment can also affect your senses of taste and smell, which might change your enjoyment of food.

General tips for eating during treatment:

- if you have a low appetite, try eating smaller meals more often during the day
- if you're not eating much, you could try high-calorie or 'build-up' drinks. You can buy these from pharmacies or your dietitian may give you a prescription
- if you feel sick, you could try drinking ginger or peppermint tea, or eating ginger biscuits

- try to avoid fatty, acidic, 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

Speak to your GP or healthcare team if you're not eating or drinking enough. They may refer you to a dietitian or give you treatment to help you get the nutrients you need.

More information

You can read more about eating with a low appetite on [page 22](#), how your diet can help with bowel problems on [page 26](#) and eating when you have fatigue on [page 24](#).





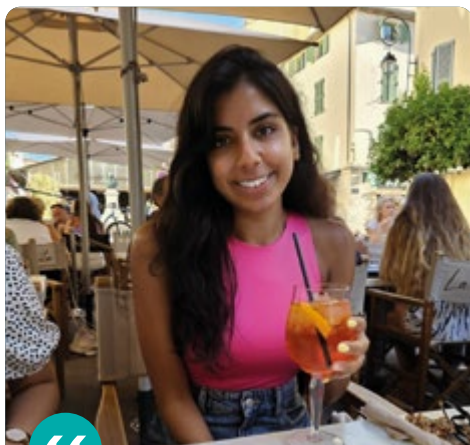
“Chemotherapy changed my palate, and I started craving foods that I don't normally eat like lemon curd, raspberry ripple ice cream and dark chocolate”
Graham

Eating with a low appetite

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

Speak to your GP or specialist nurse if you are having problems with eating enough. They can give you emotional support and practical help to eat a balanced diet. They may prescribe medicines, for example if you have sickness or a sore mouth.

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.



“

I tried to eat little and often. If I was watching a film or reading a book, I would make myself a little snack plate to graze so I wasn't fully aware I was actually eating.

Shikha

”

There are several things you can try that may improve your appetite.

For some, focusing on making mealtimes more enjoyable can help. For example, eating in a relaxed environment or with friends and having the foods you enjoy.

If your sense of taste has changed, using herbs, spices, pickles and sauces, flavoured olive oils, and lemon and lime juice can add flavour to food.

Your friends and family may also be able to help you with cooking. This can be useful if smells from food make you feel sick. Pre-prepared foods that can be chilled or frozen can also help if you can't cook for yourself. Just make sure they are reheated properly before eating. If you are still struggling, try choosing foods that don't need cooking like cheese and crackers, or breadsticks with dip.

Other tips that can help boost your appetite include:

- eating at similar times each day
- getting some fresh air and exercise before eating – even a short, gentle walk can help
- eating large meals in smaller portions – things like soups, dhal and lasagne – that way you can go back for more if you want to
- drinking energy-rich drinks, like smoothies if you don't feel like eating
- if you find that you get full quickly, try not to drink anything for half an hour before a meal. Have small sips while eating, unless you need fluids to help you swallow. If you try this, it is important to drink more between meals

You may also find these tips helpful if you're struggling to gain weight. You can read more about gaining weight on [**page 38**](#).

Managing cancer-related tiredness (fatigue)

Bowel cancer and its treatment can cause extreme tiredness. This is called fatigue. It can affect you physically, emotionally and mentally. If you are worried about fatigue, speak to your GP or hospital team.

What is fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue is the most common symptom experienced by people with cancer. It is exhausting and can't be relieved by rest or sleep. It usually affects people with bowel cancer during treatment but for some people, it can continue for months or years after treatment.

As fatigue can't be relieved, and can last for a long time, it may affect your day-to-day life. If you have fatigue, it is important that you eat a healthy balanced diet if you can. A balanced diet helps boost your energy. You can read more about eating a healthy balanced diet on [**page 4**](#).

Preparing meals can be challenging when you have cancer-related fatigue. The tips below can help you cope with fatigue.

“

I batch-cooked simple meals like vegetable soups, stews, and slow-cooked dishes, then froze them in portions. Having wholesome meals ready to go meant I could still eat well even when I didn't feel up to cooking.

Leanne

”

Dietary tips for managing and living with fatigue:

- follow a healthy balanced diet to make sure you get all the nutrients you need
- include some of your favourite foods and drinks – it's important to enjoy mealtimes and look after your wellbeing
- healthier ready meals or prepared salads are a good option on days when you don't feel able to cook
- eating little and often can help keep your energy levels steady and stop you feeling hungry
- ask friends or family to help you buy and prepare food
- if you are able, batch cook several portions of soups and other meals so you can put some in the fridge or freezer for when you don't feel like cooking
- 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

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 three or more times a day, or more often than is usual for you.

What causes diarrhoea?

Bowel cancer and its treatments – including surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy – can cause diarrhoea. Other possible causes include diet, medicines such as antibiotics and infections. Your doctor will work with you to find out what is causing your diarrhoea so you can get the right treatment.

Some people may have symptoms of diarrhoea when they have constipation. This is because poo can block your bowel, and the blockage may only allow runny poo to leak through. This runny poo can look like diarrhoea. If this is suspected, your doctor might treat you with laxatives to relieve the blockage. You can read more about constipation on [**page 32**](#).

Avoiding dehydration

When you have diarrhoea, you need to drink enough fluids to avoid getting dehydrated. Take regular small sips and aim for at least six to eight glasses of fluids a day. Avoid sugary or fizzy drinks and drinks that contain caffeine, such as 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 that you take 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.

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



Food and drink to try:

- water – up to two litres a day
- bananas
- white rice
- oats
- pasta
- noodles
- white bread or toast
- crackers
- low fibre cereals, such as 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, such as bran and muesli
- an artificial sweetener called sorbitol – found in sugar-free sweets and drinks

What should I eat?

Light, bland and easily digested foods can help with diarrhoea after bowel cancer treatment. In the first few weeks and months after surgery and radiotherapy, you might need to cut back on high fibre foods. These include wholemeal bread, bran-based cereals and brown rice. You can read more about low fibre diets on [page 18](#).

When you can, it's important to eat a healthy balanced diet. Eating little and often throughout the day and eating slowly might help reduce 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.

Important

Always speak to your healthcare team before taking probiotics.

It might also be helpful to keep track of which foods make your symptoms better or worse. The way your body reacts to different foods is likely to change during and after treatment. That is why it's worth trying foods again to see if you are able to tolerate them when your symptoms settle. You can keep a record of how you react to different types of food on [page 45](#).

Some people take probiotics to prevent or reduce diarrhoea during and after cancer treatment. Probiotics are live bacteria and yeasts that improve the balance of bacteria in the gut. You can find them in some food products, such as yoghurts, or in food supplements. Some people find they help with diarrhoea but there isn't enough evidence for health professionals to recommend taking them. You should not take probiotics during chemotherapy or if you have low levels of white blood cells because they can increase the risk of infection.



“ I had to limit my fibre intake, especially beans, lentils and some cereals. My stomach struggled to digest these foods, particularly during the two week period when I was taking my chemo tablets.

Ian

”

Diarrhoea medicines

It is important to tell your doctor about any over the counter medicines and nutritional supplements you're taking. They may suggest you stop taking medicines that may be making your diarrhoea worse.

Important

Always speak to your doctor before taking any over the counter 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 your gut (anti-diarrhoea medicines). Examples include loperamide (brand names include Imodium or Dioraleze) or codeine phosphate. They will give you information on how and when to take these medicines.

If your bowel cancer treatment is likely to cause diarrhoea, your doctor may give you anti-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 the 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 can tell you about products and local services that can help you cope with diarrhoea.

More support

You can also contact **Bladder & 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. Pelvic radiation disease is a group of symptoms that affect some people after radiotherapy to the pelvic region.

You can find their contact details on **pages 57–58**.

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.

If you're going to the toilet less than three times a week, you're likely to have constipation.

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

Many things can cause constipation, including:

- bowel surgery
- some medicines – including opioid painkillers, iron supplements and antidepressants
- other illnesses, such as diabetes, thyroid problems or depression
- not eating enough fibre
- not drinking enough fluids
- lack of movement and physical activity

Please note

You should 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).

Important

If you have an ileostomy, contact your stoma care nurse or visit the hospital emergency department if you haven't passed poo or wind for more than 12 hours.



What should I eat and drink?

If you have constipation, you should still eat at least three meals a day and drink six to eight glasses of fluids, such as water, each day. If you're able to eat fibre without it causing symptoms, add more to your diet, especially wholegrains, vegetables and fruit. You should add this gradually and in small portions to avoid wind and bloating.

Always speak to your 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.

When you're recovering from treatment, high fibre foods should be well cooked and chewed well. This makes them easier to digest. If you're adding more fibre to your diet, make sure you're drinking more fluids to avoid getting dehydrated. Be careful not to overdo it – eating too much fibre can make constipation worse. It can take a few weeks to see any change in your bowel habit. You can find out more about fibre on [page 53](#).

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 such as 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, also known as golden linseeds

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.



Other things to try:

- regular physical activity
- avoiding sitting down for long periods of 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
- massaging your stomach area firmly in a clockwise movement can help get your bowel moving and can ease bloating and wind



Wind

Everyone passes wind. Although this can be embarrassing, it is normal. You may pass wind through your mouth (burping) or through your bottom (flatulence).

Speak to your GP or healthcare team if you are having a lot of wind or pain in your abdomen.

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 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 32](#).

You may find that some types of food and drink cause more wind. You can use the food and symptoms diary on [page 45](#) to help you identify 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 cooking them instead.

Important

You shouldn't cut out whole groups of food or make big changes to your diet without speaking to your healthcare team or a dietitian.

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

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

How can diet help?

- it's best to avoid missing meals – drinks and snacks help if there's a long gap between meals
- try sitting up straight when eating and avoid lying down during the day
- slow down your eating and drinking to avoid swallowing too much air
- make sure you're drinking enough fluid but avoid fizzy drinks
- you should avoid sugar-free chewing gum and boiled sweets, as these can cause wind
- add fibre to your diet gradually if needed – eating too much in one go can cause wind and can make constipation worse
- drink peppermint tea to help reduce wind
- oats and linseeds (also called flaxseeds) can help with wind and bloating – you could try an oat-based breakfast cereal or porridge
- probiotic supplements might help some people with wind and bloating, although the evidence is limited

Always check with your healthcare team before taking probiotics.

If you try probiotic supplements, take the dose recommended by the manufacturer and take them for at least four weeks to see if they're helping. If you eat probiotic yoghurts, check that they don't contain artificial sweeteners as these can cause wind. More information about probiotics can be found on [page 28](#).

What else can I do to reduce wind?

Be as active as you can. 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.

Managing your weight

Bowel cancer and its treatment often causes changes to your weight. You might find that you lose or gain weight.

What causes weight loss?

Some people lose weight when affected by bowel cancer or its treatment. There may be several possible reasons for your weight loss, such as the cancer itself or the side effects of treatment.

If you're eating normally but still losing weight, the cancer may be affecting how your body absorbs and uses the nutrients in your food.

Side effects of treatment, such as constipation and diarrhoea, can affect your appetite. Extreme tiredness (fatigue), a change in your sense of taste and smell, feeling and being sick, and emotional stress can lead to problems with eating. Getting medical advice and treatment for these symptoms may help you to eat more and put on weight.

Gaining weight safely

If you have lost weight, you may choose to gain more to get to a healthy weight. If this is the case, it is important that you gain weight in a healthy way.

How can I put on weight?

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

Eating several small meals each day can help you take in more calories and digest your food more easily. Try to include energy-rich foods such as peanut butter or Greek yoghurt to your meals and snacks. Make sure you have the food and drinks that you enjoy.

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.

If you feel well enough, try to do some regular gentle physical activity. This can help build up your muscle strength and may help improve your sense of wellbeing. Ask your GP or healthcare team if they can refer you to a physiotherapist to help you find activities that are safe to do during and after cancer treatment.

Getting support

Speak to your 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 if you need treatment.

Losing weight safely

If you are overweight, it's important to speak to your healthcare team before trying to lose weight. This is because it is usually more important to focus on maintaining strength, energy and muscle during cancer treatment. Your healthcare team can give you information on which types of food you should eat, depending on your needs, 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. If possible, aim for at least 30 minutes of physical activity, five days a week.

If you find this difficult, you could try going for gentle walks and avoiding 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.

Tips to help you lose weight:

- start the day with a healthy breakfast, such as porridge, wholegrain cereals or bread, boiled or poached eggs, lower-fat milk and a portion of fruit
- choose lower-fat options where available but be aware 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
- think about your portion sizes. Even healthy foods, such as olive oil and nuts, can make you put on weight if you eat too much
- try to avoid sugary snacks and choose healthier options, such as a small portion of nuts and seeds or some carrot sticks with cottage cheese or low fat hummus
- swap creamy, fatty or sugary food and drinks for fruit, vegetables and water
- 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. Drink as little alcohol as possible and no more than 14 units a week - a glass of wine or pint of low-strength lager is two units

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. You could also ask a friend to support you. Being active or eating healthily together can help you both keep on track.

Weight-loss medication

You might be taking medication to help you with your weight loss. If you are, it is important that your healthcare team is aware, so that they can check the safety of using these medications with your cancer treatment.

After treatment

Once you have finished treatment, most of your diet-related symptoms should get better.

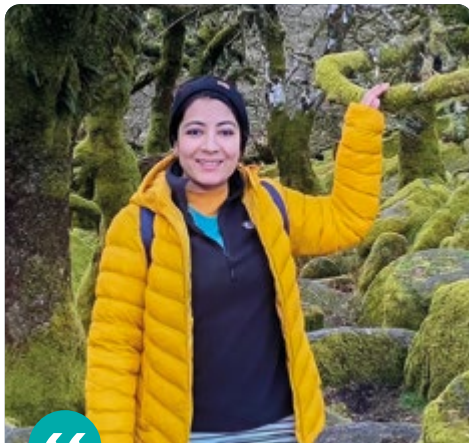
This may make it easier for you to follow a healthy diet. A healthy diet can help you feel your best, with or beyond cancer. You can read general information about eating well on **pages 4 to 6**.

You may find that some food sensitivities remain after treatment. This is because your treatment may have changed how your body processes certain foods. The food diary on **page 45** might help you and your healthcare team identify foods that don't work for you. Knowing the foods that trigger symptoms can help you manage your diet going forward.

Can diet help prevent bowel cancer coming back?

Researchers and health care professionals don't know yet how to stop bowel cancer coming back after treatment.

The following things may help reduce your risk of cancer coming back, but we need more research and evidence to fully understand this.



“

I now eat less – I still enjoy all my favourite foods, but my portion sizes have changed. I eat five smaller meals throughout the day rather than three big meals.

Aasma

”

Tips for keeping well after treatment:

- maintaining a healthy weight – your body mass index (BMI) is one way of finding out if you're a healthy weight. Visit the NHS website for information on BMI
- if you're able, be physically active for at least 30 minutes a day and spend less time sitting down
- try to avoid high-calorie food and sugary drinks
- eat more wholegrains, vegetables, fruit and beans
- limit red meat and avoid processed meat
- avoid alcohol if possible. If you do drink alcohol, drink no more than 14 units a week and spread it out over the week, with at least two alcohol-free days a week

Making healthy lifestyle choices is good for your overall health and can prevent or reduce other health problems, such as 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:

- diabetes
- a long-term health condition that affects what you can eat, such as 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
- low anterior resection syndrome (LARS) – this is a long-term bowel condition that some people may experience after some types of rectal cancer surgery

You can find out more about LARS on our website at [bowelcanceruk.org.uk](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk).

A physiotherapist can help if you have extreme tiredness (fatigue) or need help getting your strength and fitness back.

Physiotherapists can also help with other problems caused by bowel cancer and its treatment. For example, if surgery has caused you to lose control of your bowel, they can show you pelvic floor exercises that may help. You can find more ways to help regain bowel control on our website at [bowelcanceruk.org.uk](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk).

Health and wellbeing events

Some hospitals offer health and wellbeing events where you can find information on managing your health and wellbeing after cancer treatment. This may include information on diet and lifestyle. You may also have the opportunity to meet other people facing the same issues as you to share tips and advice, and to support one another.

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.

Eating well: things to remember

- Speak to your healthcare team or a dietitian before making any big changes to your diet
 - Try to eat a healthy balanced diet
 - Make meal and snack times enjoyable, for example by having some of your favourite food and drinks
 - Be as physically active as you can
 - If you don't feel like eating, you could try eating smaller amounts more often or drinking high-calorie drinks
 - If you're trying to eat more fibre, add it to your diet gradually to avoid wind, bloating and stomach cramps
- If your healthcare team has advised you to follow a low fibre diet, try well-cooked vegetables with the skin and seeds removed
 - Tell your healthcare team if you're taking any food supplements – vitamins or supplements may affect your cancer treatment
 - Using our food and symptoms diary might help you identify which foods are causing bowel symptoms – see [page 45](#)

Food and symptoms diary

Keeping a diary of food and symptoms may help you identify which foods you react to. Write down the amount of food you eat as well as how long any reactions last.

You might find that after eating certain foods it can take up to a day before you get symptoms. You may want to share your diary with your dietitian or healthcare team, so they can advise on how to manage your symptoms.

You can download copies of this diary from [bowelcanceruk.org.uk](https://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk)

Date and time	Food, drinks and medicine taken	How much?	What was the symptom or reaction?	How long did it last?

The food groups

Vegetables and fruit

Vegetables and fruit are an important part of a healthy balanced diet. They are rich in vitamins and minerals. You should try to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. To get the most benefits aim to eat a variety of fruit and vegetables, preferably ones that are a range of different colours.

As well as vitamins and minerals, fruit and vegetables are high in fibre. Fibre keeps your digestive system working well and has many other benefits.

You can read more about fibre on [**page 53**](#).

Some people find they're not able to cope with eating some types of fruit or vegetables. For example, some vegetables, such as broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts can cause uncomfortable symptoms, such as wind. The diary on [**page 45**](#) can help you identify which foods might be causing bowel symptoms.

One portion could include:

- 30g unsweetened dried fruit – eat this at mealtimes to reduce the risk of tooth decay
- 80g of fresh, canned or frozen vegetables or fruit – canned varieties should be in natural juice or water, without added sugar or salt
- 80g beans or pulses – pulses only count for one of your 5-a-day, no matter how much you eat
- 150ml juices or smoothies – try not to have more than one of these a day

Examples of portion sizes



Handful of grapes



One pepper



One banana



One cereal bowl of spinach



Three heaped tablespoons
of beans, peas or lentils

Starchy foods

Starchy foods are a good source of energy and are an important part of a healthy diet. Around a third of the food you eat should be starchy foods. Starchy foods include bread, pasta, cereals, rice, grains and starchy vegetables, such as potatoes and sweet potatoes.

Try to eat wholegrain varieties when you can and leave the skin on your potatoes. This is because they contain more nutrients and fibre.

You can read more about fibre on [**page 53**](#).

Depending on your treatment, your healthcare team might advise that you to follow a low fibre diet for a while. You should follow the advice of your healthcare team as they are able to tailor dietary advice to your specific needs.

You can read more about a low fibre diet on [**page 18**](#).

Protein

Protein is important for strength and healing. It can help your body recover after surgery or cancer treatment.

Good sources of protein include:

- chicken
- fish
- eggs
- beans, peas and pulses
- tofu
- nuts and seeds

Nuts, seeds, beans and pulses are high fibre foods. This means that they may not be the best protein source for you if you have been advised to follow a low fibre diet. Some people find these foods can also make diarrhoea and wind worse when eaten in large amounts. We recommend using the symptoms diary on [page 45](#) to help you work out which foods work best for you.

You can find more information about a low fibre diet on [page 18](#).

Read [pages 26 and 35](#) for information about diarrhoea and wind.

Examples of protein sources



Chickpeas or beans



Eggs



Tinned fish

While meat is a good source of protein and iron, red and processed meats are linked to health risks. Red meat includes beef, pork, lamb, venison and goat.

To limit these risks, try not to eat a more than three small portions of red meat a week. This is about 350g–500g of cooked meat a week.

If you are reducing the amount of red meat in your diet, you should add in protein from other sources. Good alternative sources include beans and lentils, which can add protein whilst adding fibre and extra nutrients.

If you can, it is best to avoid processed meats, such as bacon, ham sausages and salami.

You can also swap red or processed meat for chicken, fish or plant-based meat substitutes, such as soya products or tofu.

Dairy

Dairy foods are sources of protein, calcium and vitamins. Examples include milk, cheese, yoghurt and butter. You should try to eat some dairy foods each day, choosing lower-fat, unsweetened varieties where possible.

These include:

- semi-skimmed or skimmed milk
- reduced-fat cheese
- plain, low fat yoghurt

If you're trying to gain weight full fat dairy foods may be a better option for you. Your healthcare team should be able to give you more specific advice based on your individual needs.

We have more information on gaining weight on [page 38](#).

If you eat non-dairy alternatives, look for unsweetened options with added calcium. Other sources of calcium include figs, nuts, tempeh and leafy vegetables such as kale.

Fats

Our bodies need fat for energy, brain function and as a source of vitamins. You only need a small amount of fat in your diet unless you're trying to gain weight.

Some types of fats are healthier than others.

Healthier fats are found in:

- oily fish such as salmon, mackerel and sardines
- nut and seeds, including nut and seed butters
- nut and seed oils, for example sesame oil
- olives and olive oil
- avocados

Choosing low fat options can help you reduce your fat intake.

Reading the nutrition label on food packaging can give you a better idea of how much fat is in an item. For a food to be considered low fat it should contain 3 grams of fat or less per 100 grams.

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 higher amounts of saturated fat include fatty or processed meat, cheese, butter, cream, cakes, biscuits and chocolate. While it is best to limit these items, it is still important that you enjoy what you eat. It's OK to have some of your favourite food and drinks too.

Fibre

Dietary fibre is the parts of plants that you can eat but your body can't digest. This means it passes into the bowel without being absorbed. Because of this fibre has a number of benefits for your health.

The health benefits of fibre include:

- keeping food moving through your bowel
- helping your bowel movements become regular
- feeding good bacteria in your bowel
- keeping you feeling fuller for longer
- preventing constipation
- helping you maintain a healthy weight

There is also some evidence which suggests that a diet higher in fibre may reduce the risk of complications after surgery, reduce side effects of some treatments and improve survival in some patients.

Types of fibre

There are different types of fibre that have different effects on your body. Dietary fibre may be described as soluble, insoluble and fermentable. Fibre rich foods often contain more than one of the types of fibre described below.

Soluble fibre helps to keep poo soft, making it easier to pass.

Insoluble fibre bulks up poo and helps it move through the gut more quickly. This may help prevent constipation.

Most fibre is fermentable. This means it can be broken down by the bacteria in your gut. Some fibres ferment more than others. Fermented fibre feeds the good bacteria in your gut.

Sources of different types of fibre:

Soluble	Insoluble
• oats • onions • root vegetables • apples and bananas	• wholegrain cereal • wholegrain bread • nuts and seeds • leafy vegetables

Adding fibre to your diet

If needed, it's best to increase your intake of fibre gradually. This will help you reduce uncomfortable symptoms like bloating, wind and stomach cramps.

You should also try to drink plenty of fluids, for example, water, low fat milk or herbal teas. Ideally, you should avoid sugary drinks as these can lead to weight gain.

Changes you can make to increase your fibre intake include:

- choosing a higher fibre breakfast cereal like porridge or bran flakes
- adding fruit, seeds and/or nuts to your yoghurt or cereal
- switching to wholemeal or wholegrain foods
- eating plenty of vegetables with your meals
- adding pulses to your meals

After treatment, you may find it hard to digest high fibre foods such as bran, nuts or seeds. Over time, you can try to gradually increase the amount of fibre you eat. But to start with, you can make fibre easier to digest by cooking vegetables and fruit well and removing their skins. There's more about low fibre diets on [page 18](#).

How much fibre?

Healthy adults should eat at least 30g of fibre a day. Your healthcare team should explain how much fibre you need to include in your diet, depending on which treatment you've had. They can also make suggestions if you find that you struggle with high fibre foods.

Examples of portion sizes



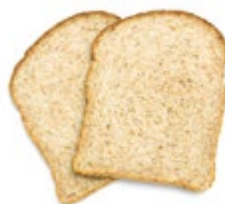
50g bowl of porridge – 5g fibre



One medium banana – 1-2g fibre



Baked potato with skin – 5g fibre



Two slices wholemeal bread – 6g fibre



80g boiled broccoli – 2g fibre



25g unsalted nuts – 1.5-2g fibre

Words used in this booklet

Carbohydrate	A nutrient needed by the body for energy
Colostomy	Where a section of the large bowel is brought out through an opening on your abdomen, allowing bowel motions (poo) to pass into a bag (appliance or pouch)
Dietitian	A healthcare professional who diagnoses and treats nutritional problems and helps people make good diet choices
Fat	A food type that is important for energy, helping the body absorb some vitamins and keeping the brain and nervous system healthy. Should only be eaten in small amounts
Fibre	The part of plant foods that the body can't digest. Fibre helps to keep the bowel healthy
Ileostomy	Where a section of small bowel is brought out through an opening on your abdomen, allowing bowel motions (poo) to pass into a bag (appliance or pouch)
Minerals	A type of nutrient that your body needs in small amounts to stay healthy
Nutrients	Substances in food needed for good health, such as protein, fat, carbohydrate, vitamins and minerals
Protein	Needed by the body for growth and repair and to keep muscles and bones healthy
Vitamins	A type of nutrient that your body needs in small amounts to stay healthy

Other useful organisations

Bladder & Bowel UK

W bbuk.org.uk

T 0161 214 4591

UK charity for people with bladder and bowel problems.

British Dietetic Association

W bda.uk.com

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

Cancer Research UK

W cancerresearchuk.org

T 0808 800 4040

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

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

W csp.org.uk

For information on what physiotherapy can offer and a searchable list of qualified physiotherapists

Colostomy UK

W 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

For information on the Eatwell Guide.

IA (Ileostomy and Internal Pouch Association)

W iasupport.org

T 0800 018 4724

A network of support groups run by and for people with ileostomies and internal pouches.

Macmillan Cancer Support

W 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](https://www.nhs.uk)

The UK's biggest health website.

NHS 111 Wales

W 111.wales.nhs.uk

NHS health information for people living in Wales.

NHS Inform

W nhsinform.scot

Health information for people living in Scotland.

Health and Social Care Northern Ireland

W online.hscni.net

NHS health information for people living in Northern Ireland.

Pelvic Radiation Disease Association

W prda.org.uk

T 01372 744338

Information and support for people with pelvic radiation disease, which is a possible long-term side effect of pelvic radiotherapy.

Penny Brohn UK

W 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

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

More support



Online Communities

Our online communities are welcoming places for everyone affected by bowel cancer to ask questions, read about people's experiences and support each other. Join us at bowelcanceruk.org.uk/online-communities



Website

Visit our website for a range of information about bowel cancer including symptoms, risk factors, screening, diagnosis, treatment, and living with and beyond the disease. Visit bowelcanceruk.org.uk



Publications

We produce a range of expert information to support anyone affected by bowel cancer. Order or download our free publications at bowelcanceruk.org.uk/our-publications



Ask the Nurse

If you have any questions about bowel cancer, contact our nurses at bowelcanceruk.org.uk/nurse

Notes

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Please donate today and help us support others affected by bowel cancer

Did you know, all of Bowel Cancer UK's information and support services are free, thanks to the generosity of our supporters and partners?

Every year, thousands of people affected by bowel cancer rely on us for trusted information and support when it's needed most. We also fund research and awareness campaigns, helping increase earlier diagnosis which can save lives.

Your support helps us be there for people affected by bowel cancer whenever they need us, before, during and after their diagnosis. **Please donate today.**

Three ways you can give

Scan

the QR code or visit
donate.bowelcanceruk.org.uk



Call

us on
020 7940 1760

Send a cheque

made payable to
'Bowel Cancer UK' to:

Bowel Cancer UK,
Unit 301,
Edinburgh House,
170 Kennington Lane,
London, SE11 5DP

Your gift could:

£5

Help someone understand the symptoms of bowel cancer and get an earlier diagnosis

£25

Help our researchers understand the reasons why younger people are often diagnosed with later stage bowel cancer

£30

Help one of our specialist nurses support someone through our free, confidential email service

£50

Help our researchers test new and faster ways to diagnose people with inherited conditions that are linked to bowel cancer

Donate today and help us be there for people affected by bowel cancer.

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**

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Patient Information Forum

Please contact us if you have any comments about the information in this booklet or if you'd like to see a list of the references we've used to produce our information: feedback@bowelcanceruk.org.uk

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