

Cancer Treatment Tips & Tricks



Food & Exercise

Nutrition

During Cancer treatment, you should follow a balanced, whole-food diet with increased protein. This includes eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, legumes, lean proteins, good fats from olive oil, and dairy. However, you do not want to add additional stress during your cancer treatment, so it is important that you don't radically change your eating habits, do the best you can and seek personalised support from your doctors and a dietitian specialising in cancer care if needed.

Loss of Appetite

A loss of appetite may be experienced during cancer treatment, specifically chemotherapy. Make the small amounts that you do eat as nutritious as possible, such as eating protein and nutrient-dense choices.

Hydration

Keep fluids high by drinking; on average, 2L of water per day is essential for flushing the toxins from chemotherapy and transporting nutrients from your food into the bloodstream.

Food Safety

Pay attention to general food hygiene and food safety measures, such as washing your hands before preparing and handling food. Always check and be aware of food expiration and use-by dates. Avoid buying and eating food from open delis. Avoid eating raw fish, eggs and chicken.

Preparing Meals in Advance

Plan for the days when you won't feel like cooking by using the time leading up to your treatment to batch-cook nutritious meals such as stews and soups that can be frozen. Having these meals on hand to quickly reheat and eat with little effort will mean nourishment and energy on the days you most need it.

Keep It Easy to Access Nutrition on Hand

One of the simplest things you can do is ensure you always have easy access to simple but nutritious food, such as protein yoghurts, baked beans in the pantry and individual tubs of hummus and pre-cut vege sticks or cheese and biscuit snack packs.



Exercise

Whenever possible, continue to exercise. Exercise is safe for cancer patients, and research shows treatment can be tolerated better by those who maintain regular exercise routines. However, always seek advice from your doctor first.

Finding Allied Health Support

To help you understand what food to eat and avoid when your treatment begins and how to build immunity and a healthy body, it may help to work with an oncology dietician. Your Oncologist, Specialist Breast Surgeon or Breast Care Nurse can refer you to an oncology dietician: that is, a dietician who works in hospital settings helping cancer patients and their families navigate nutrition issues that may occur due to the side effects of treatment, such as malnutrition, fatigue, dry mouth, constipation and diarrhea.

Alternatively, the [DAA: Dieticians Association Australia](#) are the most reputable source for finding one. They will have extensive skills and knowledge required to treat cancer patients, such as the impact a cancer diagnosis and treatment has on the absorption of nutrients.

The fees for an Oncology Dietician can vary between \$50–\$150 per session, with concession rates on offer, as well as Health Fund and Medicare rebates. You may be eligible for a Medicare rebate as part of a [Chronic Disease GP Management Plan](#). The number of visits rebated will also depend on the plan. Speak to your GP to find out if you're eligible.

During a consultation an Oncology Dietician will:

- Perform an overall physical assessment, assessing things such as weight, brittle hair, weak nails, and other signs of a nutritional imbalance.
- Go through your current diet and see where changes might need to be made. They will ask questions such as what you eat each meal, how many meals you have per day, what you crave, what you don't like, and how certain foods affect you.
- To get the most out of your first Oncology Dietitian consultation, it's best to give as much information as possible, such as your list of current medications and supplements, and side effects from any types of food. It's ideal to keep a food journal for a few days prior to the consultation so you have a list of what you eat daily, which you can go through with your practitioner.
- Once treatment has finished, an Oncology Dietician will give you the tools to be consistent with healthy eating 80% of the time, while maintaining a healthy weight range and good immunity.



There are other health providers you might want to also seek out such as an Oncology Nutritionist or an Oncology Naturopath. The difference between a Dietician and a Nutritionist is that a Dietician has a four-year university degree in Science, Nutrition and Dietetics. Dieticians also work in hospital settings whereas Nutritionists don't and can be qualified after a three-week Diploma. It is always a good idea to check a Dietician's or Nutritionist's qualifications and experience in oncology, as it really depends on what advice and guidance you are after. You can find a Nutritionist through the [Nutrition Society of Australia](#). For those who are after a more holistic approach to treatment, an Oncology Naturopath uses natural methods such as herbal medicines and physical therapies to support established conventional cancer treatments.

This section has been reviewed by [Caley Schnaid](#), an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) and Accredited Nutritionist (AN) in Australia.

Scar Healing

Scar tissue is a normal part of the healing process, but the amount of scar tissue and healing time can vary based on the size and depth of the incision, and factors such as age, ethnicity and health.

It's important to understand in advance of the surgery what to expect and prepare the mind to be most comfortable post-operatively, as it is to prepare the body post-operatively. Before and after surgery, you can consider lymphatic massage and physical muscle training such as Pilates or physiotherapy not only for the physical rewards but also for the positive mental state that results from physical touch and care.

Remember that scars need time to heal, take it gentle and allow this to occur for approximately 6 weeks. If you overdo it, and stretch or strain the scar, this can cause what we call a hypertrophic (thicker) scar. Scar tissue is not as elastic as skin, and will feel tighter, potentially impacting the range of motion of the tissues and joints around it. Scars can fade over time, and there are many ways that you can help support your scars to heal, in consultation with your surgeon. These include:

- Self-massage (your surgeon/team can tell you how): once your wound is fully healed, gently massaging your scar with circular motions in each direction a few times per day for a few minutes
- Application of oil or moisturiser: Gentle creams such as MooGoo and Cetaphil, use brands free of chemicals or perfumes that may irritate your skin, as well as silicone gels or tape. Use SPF50+ to protect the skin after surgery and into the future.
- Osteopathy: soft tissue techniques
- LED light therapy
- Physical therapy
- Support or compression garments



Scaring can cause discomfort, and the best thing to do if something is really sore or you feel a sharp pain, is to hold it and breathe through it. Breathing allows you to open up your diaphragm. Try square breathing – breathe in for the count of four, hold for four, breathe out for four, and hold for four.

If your scar is uncomfortable, painful or you're worried about the appearance of it and it's not resolved through these treatments and therapies, speak to your surgeon.

Finally, it is important to get to know the new 'you' and feel comfortable with your scars and body.

Chemotherapy: Health & Beauty

Chemotherapy can cause different side effects for different people. Below are some health and beauty tips to help you feel and look better during chemotherapy. Remember to check with your doctor about what is best for you.

Health

- Sunscreen and moisturiser every day
- When showering use mild non-soap products and wash your scalp with a gentle face wash or a scalp oil.
- Silk pillowcases for when your hair starts to fall out as they are gentle and soft.
- Stay hydrated; drink heaps of water. It is good for your body but also helps the nurses find your veins.
- Get lots of rest and sleep
- consider gentle yoga and meditation to help you relax.
- Eat nutritious and healthy food
- For your mouth, suck on fruit tingles, use bicarbonate of soda as a mouthwash, brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush and use a topical local anaesthetic, such as xylocaine viscous, for mouth ulcers.
- For sore muscles and aches use heat packs and have regular massages.
- Keep up your usual routine as energy permits (if your energy is low reduce your commitment), for example walking and working.
- Try to walk every day even if it is a short walk.
- To help with constipation, use coloxyl, senna, chia seeds and flaxseed.

Beauty

- Attend a Look Good Feel Better Program, these are a free 2 ½ hour workshop for people undergoing treatment for any type of cancer and include beauty tips and products to take home: <https://lgfb.org.au/>
- Use tinted moisturiser, particularly with sunscreen to add a touch of colour.
- Smile – it's really obvious and corny but smiling can make you feel better on the inside and looks great on the outside.



- If your eyebrows and eyelashes fall out, consider eyebrow tattooing and eyelash extensions. Wear lots of bright colours, head scarves, clothes and make up.
- Look after your nails, paint them a dark colour to help protect them or use shellac as it lasts for weeks and is nice and shiny.
- Get some bright funky hats and headscarves and dress them up with headbands. Use Google and YouTube for ideas on how to tie them and match your headwear to your clothes.
- Take the time each day to do your make up, draw on your eyebrows and get out of your PJ's, as although it takes effort it will make you feel better.
- If you know you are definitely going to lose your hair, get a new hairstyle/colour you have always wanted to try.
- Purchase a wig (if your budget allows), especially for special occasions.

During Chemotherapy: Tips & Tricks

At the Appointments

Depending on the type of chemotherapy you are having, you may be there for quite a while. Bring some snacks with you, as well as a drink bottle. Water is important to flush away the chemotherapy out of your system. Ensure that you wear a loose-fitting jumper in winter so that the nurse can access your veins. Veins tend to disappear when you start treatment and when nurses try to find your veins, it can be quite painful, so have a chat with your oncologist about potentially getting an access port put in. There are different types of ports so it's worth doing some research to find out the best option for you.

Side Effects and Symptoms

Keep a list of symptoms after your chemotherapy and share these with your oncologist. They will try their best to give helpful suggestions or scripts for medicines you can take. It is recommended that you exercise before chemotherapy to help lower the side effects.

Dealing with Hair Loss

Having your hair fall out can be very traumatic. You may decide to shave it off or you may like to try a cold cap to prevent hair loss during chemotherapy. It is not 100% guaranteed that you will keep your hair, but this is a great option for some patients. Get addicted to hats and scarfs! It can be very fun to go shopping for different hats and scarfs. Stock up before you start chemotherapy. Check with your private health insurer as they may cover part of the cost of a wig.



Keeping Busy

You may go back to work or you may decide to stay home during chemotherapy. If you choose to stay at home, keep yourself busy. If you are feeling well enough, go out for coffee with friends! Otherwise, buy some good books and invest in streaming services like Netflix. You may feel major stress or anxiety post-surgery and during your chemotherapy. There are many tools for stress-relief that can be beneficial such as listening to motivational music, keeping a journal, deep breathing, inspirational reading and mindfulness.

If you decide to continue working or studying throughout your treatment, ensure that your manager is on the same page as you and they have a full understanding of what it's going to be like. You might feel fine and work throughout the entire treatment or you might decide that it's not working as well as you'd hoped. Ensure that that you're actively communicating with your employer/teacher about what's going on.

Radiotherapy for Breast Cancer: What to Expect

Radiotherapy, also referred to as radiation therapy, is a common cancer treatment prescribed by a Radiation Oncologist to treat a cancer diagnosis. Radiotherapy works by making small breaks inside the DNA of cells, causing them to die and prevent them from continuing to grow, spread or multiply.

The radiation is delivered as External Band Radiation Therapy (EBRT), which consists of precisely targeted radiation beams, from outside of the body. It is a fast, painless and safe treatment commonly started about four weeks after surgery, or if chemotherapy is also prescribed, about four weeks after chemo has finished.

Radiotherapy will be prescribed:

- following breast-conserving (lumpectomy) surgery to ensure any undetected cancer cells that may be in the breast are destroyed and to reduce the risk of a localised cancer reoccurrence.
- after a mastectomy, depending on the risk of a cancer reoccurrence in the chest area OR
- if lymph nodes from the armpit were removed and the risk of a cancer reoccurrence in this area, is high.

Before starting a course of radiotherapy treatment, a CT scan will be taken of your chest so that the area to be targeted can be mapped out.



If you had breast-conserving surgery, the radiotherapy will be targeted to the specific part of your breast where the tumour was. If you had a mastectomy, the radiotherapy will be targeted to your chest wall. Some women may also have radiotherapy on their armpit or neck if the lymph nodes are also being targeted.

Many women will require very small (similar in size to a freckle), permanent tattoos on their chest. These tattoos help the radiation therapist position you correctly on the machine and deliver treatment to the right location.

You can expect to have radiotherapy administered every day, Monday to Friday. The total number of treatments any individual has, however, will vary from person to person and will be based on that person's cancer type and stage as well as the size and location of the tumour.

During each treatment session, a technician will place you into the correct position on a bed underneath the machine. Once in position, you will be required to lie still until the machine has finished, generally around 1–5 minutes. The treatment is painless. The radiation does not stay in your body during or after treatment, so it is safe for you to spend time with family and friends.

Tips and tricks while undergoing radiotherapy

- Wear soft natural cotton tops, under your bra, to reduce irritation to your skin.
- Keep talking to your breast care nurse or a member of the radiotherapy team about how to look after your skin, as it changes, during and after treatment. They will recommend gentle soaps, creams or moisturisers that are suitable to treat radiotherapy burns, dryness and inflammation.
- Ask if there are any special parking spots available at your radiotherapy clinic. Sometimes spots are reserved, or fees reduced, for people undergoing treatment.
- Take a book with you to each session or have a good podcast lined up, as some days you may have to wait for a machine to be available.

The side effects of radiation therapy accumulate over time, and you may experience:

- Tiredness – tiredness (fatigue) can start to be felt 1–2 weeks after radiotherapy starts and will continue during treatment. This will usually ease a few weeks after your treatment finishes
- Red and dry skin – skin at the targeted area may start to become red and dry after a few weeks of treatment. It usually returns to normal 4–6 weeks after treatment ends. The nurses will show you how to care for your skin. They will suggest a cream to apply to the radiated area, such as Sorbolene cream or MooGoo, and how frequently to apply it. This should be commenced from the day you begin treatment.



- Inflammation and blistering – are less common and will depend on how many treatment sessions that you have. Your skin may become itchy and/or very irritated and blisters may develop. The nurses will closely monitor your skin and recommend how you should treat the area.
- Aches and pains – you may experience minor aches or shooting pains that last for a few moments during treatment.
- Swelling – some women develop fluid in the breast (breast oedema) that can last for up to 12 months or, in some cases, up to five years and radiation therapy to the armpit may increase the chance of developing lymphoedema in the arm. Talk to your radiation oncologist or radiation oncology nurse about any changes you experience.
- Armpit hair loss – radiation therapy to the breast does not cause you to lose hair from your head, however, you may lose hair from the treated armpit.

Longer term effects of radiotherapy

- Changes to breast and skin – you will attend regular checks with your Radiation Oncologist post treatment to monitor changes to your breast and skin, but you may experience your breast becoming firmer or smaller and there may also be mild, permanent tanning of the skin and underarm area that was treated.
- Lymphoedema – if radiotherapy is delivered to the lymph nodes in the armpit area you may develop lymphoedema, a condition where fluid collects in the arm, causing it to develop some swelling. Your oncologist will discuss this possibility with you and advise what signs and symptoms to look out for and what to do if you are concerned.
- There are also rare, long and short term side effects that may impact your ribs, lungs, heart or nerves, although these are not very common with modern treatment. Your oncologist will discuss these with you before your treatment commences. If you are concerned that you may be experiencing any of these side effects, please speak to your medical team immediately.

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