

Adult dietetic team
Royal Brompton Hospital
Harefield Hospital

Making eating easier when you have a poor appetite

This leaflet aims to make eating easier if you have a poor or low appetite. If you have any questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

You may have a poor or low appetite when you are in hospital and even once you go home.

Poor or low appetite may be caused by any of these things:

- loss of taste or smell
- loss of desire to eat
- unfamiliar environment or food choices
- infection
- pain
- medicines may make you feel sick (nauseous)
- breathlessness and tiredness (fatigue)
- stress, anxiety or depression
- age, appetite declines as we get older

Poor appetite in combination with illness or surgery can result in weight loss. This is likely due to the inflammation from your illness or medical treatment.

To improve your nutrition, you may be encouraged to eat small and frequent high energy and protein meals or snacks. This makes it easier to get the calories and protein for recovery.

Consuming a well balanced, nourishing diet can:

- improve wound healing
- increase muscle strength
- increase energy levels
- reduce length of hospital stay
- reduce unintentional weight loss

Important

You might have been advised to follow a “healthy” diet in the past. However, this may not be a suitable diet if you are undergoing or recovering from medical treatment.

If you require a specialist diet due to a medical condition such as diabetes, kidney or liver disease. You may benefit from being referred to a dietitian for personalised advice. Please speak to your consultant or GP to arrange this

If you cannot manage to eat a main meal

- Try to eat small, frequent meals. Aim for 6 to 7 small meals a day as large portions may feel overwhelming.
- Include a high calorie or protein nourishing snack or drink if you cannot finish your main meal.
- Establish regular mealtimes and eat at the same time each day, aiming to eat 2 to 3 hours apart.
- Have high calorie snacks and drinks readily available. There are some suggestions on pages 4 and 5.
- Make the most of mealtimes when your appetite is good during the day and try to eat more.

Quick and easy meal ideas

Quick breakfasts

Breakfast cereal with fortified milk (see page 7), soya yogurt or Greek yogurt with dried fruit nuts or muesli with fruit.

Toast or scone with butter or margarine and jam, and a milk or fruit yoghurt smoothie.

A banana and peanut butter sandwich.

Cheese or avocado on toast with butter or margarine.

Porridge with fortified milk, topped with honey, fruit, nuts and seeds.

Boiled, poached, fried or scrambled eggs on toast with butter, cheese or cream. Add fortified milk, cheese, salmon.

Easy meals

Baked beans on toast.

A toasted ham, cheese and tomato sandwich or tuna melt sandwich.

Ready-made or microwave meals, such as fresh pasta with meat or cheese and vegetables. Try to avoid diet or lower calorie options.

Frozen chapati with butter or ghee with packet daal and natural yoghurt.

Packet of savoury rice or pasta with added meat, cheese, pulses and butter or oil.

Tinned creamy soup (consider adding extra cream or soya cream) with bread and butter.

Packet of noodles with an additional soft boiled egg on top.

Smoothie (serves 1)

1 glass (200ml) of fortified milk, tinned coconut milk or soya milk

1/2 tin (200g) of peaches or 1 whole banana

1 handful of frozen or fresh berries

3 tablespoons of Greek yoghurt or a dairy alternative

1 tablespoon oats

2 teaspoons honey or golden syrup

Add all the ingredients above to a blender. Blend until smooth.

Mango lassi (serves 1)

1/2 cup (125ml) of mango pulp

(from 2 fresh mangoes or canned mango pulp)

1/2 cup (125ml) of thick yogurt

1/2 cup (125ml) of fortified milk

1 tablespoon of sugar, to taste

1/4 teaspoon of cardamom powder (1 to 2 cardamom pods)

Add all the ingredients above to a blender. Blend until smooth. Or add to a bowl and use a hand blender.

Milkshake (serves 1)

1/3 pint (200ml) fortified milk

2 scoops (60g) of ice cream

2 heaped tablespoons milkshake powder

Whisk together with a fork

You can also make this by adding soft fruits, full-fat yoghurt or ice cream and honey to fortified milk

Vanilla vegan shake (serves 1)

1/2 medium banana

2 large tablespoons (25g) of cashew nuts

2/3 of a cup (180ml) soya milk

1 teaspoon of vanilla extract

2 tablespoons (20g) of pea protein

Add above ingredients to a blender. Blend until smooth.

You can also make this by adding soft fruits, coconut cream, or golden syrup to fortified milk

Vegan milk options:

Choose sweetened versions as they normally contain more calories and fortified versions.

Per 1/3 cup (100ml):

- Soya milk 41 kcal, 3.2g protein
- Oat milk 45 kcal, 1g protein
- Tinned coconut milk 140kcal, 1g protein

Sweet snack ideas

Biscuits, cakes, pastries or fruit muffins

Thick and creamy yoghurt or fromage frais

Desserts, custard or rice pudding

Waffles or pancakes

Chocolate, sweets or ice cream

Dried, fresh or tinned fruit with dairy or soya cream or custard

Puff puff or chin chin

Egg tarts, mochi, milky sago, yagkwa or anpan

Gulab jamun, barfi, baklava, maamoul or kuih

Granola and yogurt or muesli bars

Drozdowka, apple pancakes or pasteli

Jam or chocolate spread sandwiches

Savoury snack ideas

Nuts and seeds

Crackers with cheese

Crisps or bread with dips, such as houmous, tzatziki, baba ganoush and guacamole

Peanut butter or beans on toast with cheese

Marmite and cheese on toast or avocado on toast

Pieces of cheese or Quorn® or meat, such as a chicken leg

Pretzels, or dry and smoked sausages, potato pancakes or tiropitakia

Moin moin, fried ackee and bell peppers, or boiled or fried dumplings

Sausage rolls, Scotch eggs, mini quiche, spring rolls, plantain crisps or cassava crisps

Kofta, falafel, sambossek or kibbeh

Sushi (tuna or salmon)

Pakora, samosa or Bombay mix

Olives and antipasti (including cured meats and cheeses)

100 calorie boosters

Some ideas and examples of boosters that are around 100kcal each.

Additions to recipes and meals:

- 1 tablespoon of peanut butter
- 1/4 can (50ml) of coconut cream
- 2 tablespoons of condensed milk
- 2 tablespoons of honey, sugar or jam
- 2 tablespoons of houmous
- Half an avocado
- 1 tablespoon of butter or oil
- 2 tablespoons of double cream

Sweet snacks:

- 1 small pot of full-fat dairy or soya yogurt
- 1 banana
- 1 glass (200ml) of orange juice
- 1 scoop of dairy or soya ice cream
- 5 jelly babies
- 1 small handful of dried fruit
- 2 dates
- 1 (35g) cake rusk or 2 digestive biscuits

Savoury snacks:

- 1 small handful of nuts
- 1 and 1/2 boiled eggs
- 1 bag of crisps
- 3 chakris
- 2 falafels
- 3 cheese straws
- 1 (30g) meat jerky
- 2 tablespoons (25g) of wasabi peas

How can I make every mouthful count?

Use these everyday ingredients to boost the calories in your meals

Add extra sugar, jam, golden syrup or honey to:

Hot drinks, milkshakes or smoothies
Cereal, porridge, toast, crumpets, waffles,
English muffins, pita, roti
Puddings, pancakes, fruit

Add extra butter, margarine, oil or ghee to:

Bread, toast, crumpets, roti, naan, muufo, khubz
Sauces, mashed potato, vegetables

Add extra cream, crème fraîche or full cream milk to:

Cereal, porridge, fruit
Puddings, ice cream, custard, pastry, cakes
Milkshakes, smoothies, coffee
Sauces, soups, mashed potato
Pasta sauces, scrambled eggs

Add grated cheese to:

Scrambled eggs, omelette, beans on toast, jacket potato
Sauces, soups, mashed potatoes
Pasta dishes, pizza, cooked vegetables or salads (feta, haloumi)

Add skimmed milk or soya powder to:

Milk, milkshakes, custard, porridge, milky sago, kheer, tzatziki
Creamy sauces, soups, mashed potato
Porridge or cereal or semolina

Add evaporated milk, condensed milk, yoghurt, custard or kaymak ice cream to:

Desserts, puddings, cakes and pastries
Milkshakes, smoothies, coffee
Hot chocolate, fruit, fruit pies
Crumbles and jellies

If you feel full too quickly

- Try small meals and frequent snacks.
- Avoid drinking with your meal as this can be filling, drink fluids in between your meal.
- If you cannot eat a meal, try a nourishing snack or drink.
- Have a snack at bedtime or a fortified hot drink.
- Add fortified milk to foods and drinks.

If you have dry mouth

- Drink plenty of fluids (8 to 10 250ml cups a day). Have frequent sips throughout the day.
- Try sucking on crushed ice, frozen fruit juice or ice lollies.
- Make food with lots of sauce or gravy.
- Try not to eat too many dry, sticky foods such as bread, pastries or chocolate.
- Stimulate saliva by chewing gum, sucking sweets and using sharp flavours such as lemon or grapefruit juice.
- Avoid adding salt to meals. Meals containing high amounts of salt will make you feel thirsty. You may see salt called sodium and monosodium glutamate (MSG) on lists of ingredients.

If you feel sick (nausea)

- Try cold food and drinks.
- Avoid spicy or greasy foods, vinegar, mustard, yeast, pickles or smelly foods.
- Try dry toast or crackers.
- Sip on fizzy drinks, camomile or peppermint tea.
- Try foods and drinks containing lemon or ginger.

If you do not feel like cooking:

- Keep ready or pre-made meals in stock either frozen or chilled at home. Avoid the low calorie options.
- Consider using online grocery deliveries available from all supermarkets.
- Get meals at home (meals on wheels). Your council or other local organisations may provide meals delivered to your home, if you are eligible.
- Some companies deliver frozen meals such as Wiltshire Farm foods and COOK.
- Consider ordering takeaway meals.

Eating fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables are important source of vitamins, minerals and fibre. It is important that you continue to have these in your diet. However, they are low in calories and the high fibre content may fill you up too quickly.

Try to include them with energy dense additions such as:

- cauliflower with cheese sauce
- vegetables with extra oil or butter
- salad with creamy dressing
- fresh or tinned fruit with dairy or soya cream, yoghurt or ice cream.

What should I drink?

- It is important to include at least 8 to 10 250ml cups of fluid each day. Do this to prevent dehydration unless you are specifically told to drink a different amount by your doctor.
- Try not to fill up on fluids but spread them throughout the day.
- Try to have fluids after your meals rather than before.
- Aim to include nourishing drinks such as: fortified milk (see recipe on page 8), smoothies, lassi, kefir, labnan, milkshakes, sweetened fruit juice, hot chocolate, Ovaltine®, Nurishment® and Horlicks®.

What is fortified milk?

Fortified milk is milk that has small amounts of other foods added to it. For example, milk powder or soya powder. This increases the nutritional content (calories) without increasing the portion size.

Recipe for fortified milk:

Mix 4 heaped tablespoons of dried milk powder with 1 pint (568ml) of full-fat milk. This provides an extra 120kcal and 13.2g protein.

Vegan fortified milk:

Mix 4 heaped tablespoons of soya powder with 1 pint (568ml) of soya milk. This provides an extra 90kcal and 8g protein.

Fortified milk can be added to tea, hot chocolate, coffee, milkshakes, smoothies, cereals or porridge, sauces, soups and desserts.

How do I increase protein intake?

Increasing protein intake is important as this can help with growth and repair of body tissues and to increase muscle mass.

High protein foods include:

- chicken, lamb, turkey, beef, pork
- eggs and fish
- beans, lentils, Quorn®, soya, tofu,
- nuts and seeds
- dairy products such as milk, yoghurt and cheese

Dairy products also contain calcium for bone health.

To increase your protein intake, add fortified milk to food and drinks. Choose full-fat dairy products to increase energy content.

Oral nutritional supplements

If you have been prescribed oral nutritional supplements, always take them as your dietitian or other healthcare professional advises.

Oral nutritional supplements are specially made. They provide extra nutrients if you are unable to get the nutrition you need through your usual meals and drinks. They should be taken in addition to your normal diet and not as a food replacement.

If you are not sure, you should take them after your meals or try to add them into your meals.

For example:

- Mix supplements with milk and use with breakfast cereal, tea, and as a hot or cold milk drink.
- Make supplements into custard and other similar puddings.
- Enjoy supplements warmed up. Note: they should never be boiled.

- Freeze supplements as ice lollies or ice cream.
- Or serve supplements cold on crushed ice cubes, diluted with milk or water.

It is important not to have oral nutritional supplements just before meals. They may fill you up and reduce the amount you are able to eat.

If you no longer like the flavours or variety prescribed, please ask your healthcare team for alternative flavours.

Who to contact

If you need more advice after you leave hospital, please contact your GP.

Was this leaflet useful?

If you have any comments about this information, we'd be happy to hear from you.
email gstt.healthcontent@nhs.net

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please contact the department your appointment is with.

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern about any service or department at Royal Brompton and Harefield hospitals. Contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS):

- Royal Brompton Hospital **phone** 020 7349 7715
- Harefield Hospital **phone** 01895 826 572

Or **email** gstt.rbhh-pals@nhs.net

NHS 111

This service offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day,
phone 111 **web** www.111.nhs.uk

Become a member of the Trust

Members contribute to Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it's up to you how you get involved. To find out more, **phone** 0800 731 0319
email gstt.members@nhs.net or **web** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

Resource number: RBH new

Last reviewed: February 2025

Next review due: February 2025

© 2025 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust
A list of sources is available on request