

Eating Well with Respiratory Disease

Leicestershire Nutrition and Dietetic Service

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Information for Patients

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Why is eating well important?

A nutritionally balanced and varied diet is very important in order to help you maintain a healthy body weight. You should aim for a healthy Body Mass Index (BMI) of 20-25 kg/m² – ask your health care professional to help you calculate your BMI or use the NHS choices online calculator. It is especially important when you have a lung condition as food and fluids contain essential nutrients to help keep your lungs healthy.

You may be surprised to learn that breathing increases the amount of energy your body needs. Food is the energy source used by your body for all of its activities including breathing. A balanced and varied diet can help reduce your risk of infection and help your body fight back against infections if you become unwell.

Healthy Eating

Good nutrition can improve your quality of life, help control your symptoms and promote an active lifestyle. There are five key food groups; each group helps keep you and your lungs healthy:



1. Fruits and vegetables have vitamins and minerals that boost your immune system to help you fight off chest infections. Eat at least 5 different portions of fruits and vegetables every day.
2. Starchy carbohydrates such as potatoes, bread, chapatti, breakfast cereals, rice, and pasta provide energy for breathing and activity. Choosing wholegrain options which are higher in fibre, such as wholemeal bread, brown rice or pasta will make you feel fuller for longer and keep your bowels moving. Add a portion of these at every meal.
3. Protein sources such as beans and pulses, nuts, fish, eggs and meat are very important to keep your muscles strong, including your chest muscles that help your ribs expand as you breathe. A protein rich diet also helps to boost your immune system. Have 2-3 portions daily.
4. Dairy choices such as milk and cheese are a good source of protein, vitamins and minerals – especially calcium for healthy bones. (Make sure non-dairy alternatives are fortified with vitamins and minerals). Have 2-3 portions daily
5. Oil and spreads are also important to help you process your food especially vitamins. Choose unsaturated oils (e.g. olive or rapeseed oil) and use in small amounts.

Eating with shortness of breath

You may be experiencing difficulties co-ordinating your breathing with eating. Try the following ideas to help you with eating more:

- Eat little portions more often - aim for 3-4 smaller meals and 2-3 snacks every day. Softer moist foods are easier to chew than dry foods
- Sometimes drinks can be easier than food, especially if you have a dry mouth. Choose high calorie and protein drinks such as milk, milkshakes, fruit juice/smoothies and hot chocolate made with full fat milk (blue top). If you are having a meal, try not to drink before so you do not feel full.
- Eat in a calm, quiet environment, sit upright and take your time
- Make meals and snacks energy and protein dense to help get more goodness with less food (see food fortification section for ideas)
- If you have a dry mouth consider stopping smoking and try sucking boiled sweets and chewing gum. Make sure you are brushing your teeth and dentures regularly. Stronger flavoured food such as citrus/spicy/sweet foods can be used to stimulate saliva, and can help if your sense of taste has changed. Artificial saliva can be prescribed if you have difficulties—speak to your Nurse or Doctor.
- Powdered nutritional supplements made up with milk can be bought from most supermarkets and pharmacies and can be taken between meals. (e.g. Complan or Meritene)
- Make the most of when you feel hungry and eat foods you enjoy

How much should I drink?

It is important to drink plenty of fluids. Aim to drink a minimum of eight cups of non-alcoholic fluids each day. This can include water, tea/coffee, milk, squash and juice. Limit your alcohol intake as it causes dehydration. If you feel too full to drink fluids with meals try having a small amount with meals and drink an hour after eating.

Food fortification

A way to increase the amount of energy (calories) and protein in your diet is to fortify meals, drinks and snacks you are already eating. This shouldn't increase the volume of the food. Examples are:

- Fortified milk— add 2-4 tablespoons of milk powder to a pint of full fat milk and use throughout the day (in cereals, tea/coffee/Horlicks/Ovaltine, milkshakes, lassi, sauces and soup)
- Add full fat cheese, cream, butter, ghee, Greek yoghurt, ground almonds, cream cheese and margarine to meals and sauces
- Add sugar, honey, jam and peanut butter into drinks, puddings and on cereal
- Add syrup, cream, ice-cream and evaporated milk to fruit
- Add oil to roast potatoes, salads, meat and fish
- Add more butter or margarine in sandwiches and add condiments such as mayonnaise, salad cream or ketchup.
- Include foods that are high in protein such as meat, dairy, eggs, fish, beans and nuts at every meal/snack
- Vegan alternatives can be used to fortify meals e.g. vegan cheese, dairy-free spread, oat/soya cream and yoghurt and vegan protein powder

Micronutrients

A 'Mediterranean diet' high in fruit and vegetables, and omega-3 fats (from oily fish or vegan sources including chia seeds, ground linseed, hemp seeds and walnuts) provide high levels of nutrients which reduce inflammation. Research suggests that getting these nutrients through food makes them more effective than supplementation.

Quick and easy ideas

- Avoid 'low fat', 'diet' or 'low calorie' foods as they will not give you as much energy
- Prepare meals in advance and store in the fridge or freezer. Tinned and frozen fruit and vegetables are as good as fresh fruit and vegetables and are easier to prepare
- Consider buying ready meals or a food delivery service such as Wiltshire Farm Foods or Oakhouse Foods. Ask someone to help with your shopping and cooking. The Royal Voluntary Service can also help with shopping and can be contacted on 0808 196 3646
- Tinned/ powdered desserts are a quick snack and can be paired with ready-made custard, e.g. microwave sponge, angel delight or tinned fruit
- Use packet mixes to speed up cooking or pre-prepared tinned food such as chick peas, meat in sauce, Bombay potatoes.
- Have a selection of snacks available that are easy to reach. For example, a biscuit tin where you usually sit, yoghurts in the fridge or a box specifically for your favorite snacks
- Use a smaller plate so you do not feel overwhelmed by the portion size, and have second helpings if you can manage

Eating well in Hospital

- Ask for a copy of the menu so you can look through it at your own pace, and choose a meal that you would like. Order a starter, main meal and dessert. It doesn't matter if you can't finish everything, but it is important that the food is there for you to try. Focus on high calorie main meals rather than soup which is lower in calories and will fill you up. If you need help eating, ask for a 'red tray' so the ward staff are aware they need to assist you
- Ask for Complan milkshakes and milk to drink, as these are high in energy and protein
- Try to have 2-3 snacks per day from the drinks trolley. You can ask for additional snacks such as full fat yoghurts, cheese, rice pudding and custard pots which are kept in the fridge. Ask for extra butter to add into your main meals

Taking Supplement Drinks

- You may have been prescribed oral nutritional supplement (ONS) drinks by your Doctor or Dietitian. These are to help increase the amount of energy and protein in your diet, and to help you maintain or gain weight
- These drinks are usually like milkshakes, however there are other options such as juice style drinks, and compact (smaller) drinks - ask to speak to the Dietitian if you would like to try something different. They usually taste better when they are cold
- If you are short of breath or diabetic, sip these drinks slowly so they are more manageable, and will have a smaller effect on your blood sugar levels
- Evidence shows that the benefits of ONS are usually seen in 2-3 months and that between 300-900kcal per day (average 2 bottles) is optimum.

Further information

If you are concerned about your diet or your weight, please ask to be referred to a Dietitian either through your GP/Specialist Nurse or ward staff if you are in hospital. If you have previously been given advice from a health care professional to follow a specialised diet you should continue with this. If you are unsure, please speak to your Dietitian, Doctor or Nurse.

In times of crisis Trussell Trust Foodbanks can be accessed for emergency food parcels. Vouchers can be provided by Doctors, Health Visitors, Social Workers and citizens advice who can be contacted on 0808 208 2138. Local foodbanks can be found through the Trussell Trust website.

Visit the British Lung Foundation website <https://www.blf.org.uk/> for more information about lung diseases and eating well for healthier lungs. Online NHS resources are available for more information on living with specific respiratory conditions.

Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk

or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice

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Access our website at www.lnds.nhs.uk.