

## HELPING FAMILY AND FRIENDS UNDERSTAND CHANGES TO YOUR EATING HABITS



It may be useful to show this information sheet to family members and friends who are struggling to understand why you cannot eat the same amounts as you used to.

### **“I find it frustrating to live with somebody who has a changing appetite.”**

- ✓ The amount somebody with illness can eat and their food preferences can change from day to day, or even more frequently.
- ✓ Encourage the person to eat at the times they feel more able to do so, which may not be ‘normal’ times or in line with ‘normal’ meals.
- ✓ Have high calorie snack items in the house to offer e.g. milky drinks/puddings, yogurts, cakes, biscuits, cheese and crackers etc.
- ✓ Tinned foods or ready made meals are useful to have at home as they are quick and convenient, and can be very nourishing.

### **“What should I do when they can’t eat very much?”**

- ✓ Offer small amounts of food on a small (side) plate or bowl, so the person is not overwhelmed or put off altogether.
- ✓ Soft food may be easier to manage as they don’t need too much chewing.
- ✓ If liked, offer milk based drinks/puddings such as milkshakes, hot chocolates, malted drinks, custards, rice puddings, yogurts etc.

### **“I find it difficult to know what to prepare”**

- ✓ Ask what they fancy eating and have lots of choices of taste and texture in the cupboard/freezer.
- ✓ Taste changes can sometimes mean people dislike food they have always loved. Encourage experimentation with different flavours as people can sometimes enjoy foods they have previously disliked.

### **“It upsets me when they don’t eat”**

- ✓ It is understandable to feel hurt or rejected when somebody doesn’t eat food which has been prepared. Eating is part of our social culture and a way to show we care. However nagging or pressing someone to eat can lead to anxiety about mealtimes which may cause further loss of appetite.

### **“I feel like they are giving up when they don’t eat”**

- ✓ Eating difficulties may only be a temporary problem related to the treatment itself.
- ✓ Focus on different activities other than mealtimes and eating, like watching a television programme or getting some fresh air. This can raise the morale of the person and allow you to spend good quality time together.

### **“I can’t help watching them eat”**

- ✓ If you are concerned about the small amount somebody is eating, it is understandable to want to monitor this. However watching the person eat can be unhelpful and pressurising. It may be better to let the person eat alone or at a quieter time, which suits them.

### **“I find it distressing to see them losing weight”**

- ✓ Sometimes weight loss can be unavoidable. To see somebody physically changing can be distressing. Try to focus on positive things like having increased energy levels or being able to manage small, frequent amounts.

## **Other questions...**

### **“Does this happen to many patients?”**

- ✓ Difficulty eating is one of the most common problems facing people who are ill.
- ✓ In addition, illness can cause the body to use up more energy, causing extra fatigue and it is possible to lose weight even when eating normally.
- ✓ Many families and friends have concerns when a person’s appetite and dietary intake reduces.

### **“Why does it happen to cancer patients?”**

- ✓ Eating can be affected by treatments and medicines, for instance feeling sick or having diarrhoea can reduce desire to eat.
- ✓ Feeling low or having pain can make eating more difficult.
- ✓ Even if the cancer is not causing other problems like those mentioned above, it can still affect eating habits. This is because the body’s response to cancer can include loss of appetite.

### **“What can I do?”**

- ✓ It is often helpful to share your worries and concerns with others, particularly if they have had similar experiences.
- ✓ Macmillan Cancer Support has an online forum, or local support groups provide useful contacts.
- ✓ Please ask your Cancer Nurse Specialist or the Cancer Information Centre in the Osborne Building for further information.