



When to seek professional advice

Dietitians are just one example of the qualified healthcare professionals who are able to assess your needs and prescribe appropriate treatments, if you:

- » **have concerns about your diet and nutritional needs**
- » **are having problems with eating and drinking**
- » **are experiencing complications with your treatment for bowel cancer**

The other professionals are the speech and language therapist, specialist nurses and your dentist.

These specialist nurses and allied healthcare professionals work in the community setting and as part of your specialist hospital team and will support you during the acute treatment phase of your bowel cancer journey.

You can also be referred back to any of these health professionals at any time in your recovery pathway. They are able to offer help, advice and support to you and your family if you have concerns about eating and drinking, unexplained weight loss or weight gain, or if you are having difficulties in maintaining a healthy, balanced diet.

Do I need to see a specialist?



- » If you are a **Type I (insulin dependent) diabetic** and have to have insulin injections every day, the amount of sugar and carbohydrates you are able to have in your diet will be controlled/restricted. If you are unsure about what is a safe, balanced diet for you during your bowel cancer journey, speak to your diabetic specialist nurse or your GP about getting more support and advice
- » If you are managing a **long-term health condition** with your diet (e.g. Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol or high blood pressure, low blood pressure, gall stones, ulcerative colitis, diverticulitis, inflammatory bowel disease), ask about seeing a dietitian
- » If you have specific **food allergies or sensitivities** that affect how and what you can eat and drink (including lactose intolerance and gluten intolerance, also known as Coeliac disease) you may need the help of a dietitian to ensure that your diet is properly balanced and that you are able to maintain a healthy weight and a good quality of life
- » If you are losing weight or have other symptoms associated with treatment such as sickness, diarrhoea, fatigue, mouth sores, indigestion, cramps, numbness or tingling speak to your specialist about getting the support of a dietitian

Other problems with eating and drinking

There are many different reasons why you may experience trouble with chewing and/or swallowing food and drinks. The most common causes for people on a bowel cancer journey are those caused by the side effects of treatment, including:

- » Tooth decay, tooth loss and gum disease
- » Loose fitting dentures
- » Mucositis – soreness, pain or inflammation of the mouth, throat and oesophagus (gullet)
- » Xerostomia – a dry mouth caused by lack of saliva
- » Infections of the mouth, throat or oesophagus including thrush, ulcers and herpes simplex (cold sores)
- » Neuropathy – some chemotherapy treatments may damage the delicate nerve endings leading to weakness or spasms in the muscles used for chewing and swallowing
- » External compression – pressure from enlarged lymph nodes pressing onto the oesophagus

If the cause of the problem is not clear, your GP or specialist hospital team may refer you for more investigations and a detailed assessment of the problem.

The role of the speech and language therapist

If you are having trouble with chewing or swallowing your food, or if you are regularly coughing, gagging or choking when you are drinking thin fluids (water, tea, coffee, squashes, etc.) it is important to seek expert advice as soon as possible, so that the cause can be found.

A speech and language therapist is a professional who can help people to overcome problems with chewing and swallowing. They can teach special exercises and prescribe treatment and/or supplements to make eating and drinking safer and more comfortable.

The role of the dentist

Your mouth is a very important part of your digestive system, and you need to take good care of it.

Before you begin your cancer treatment, you are advised to have a check-up with your dentist. The dentist's role is to support the preparation for your bowel cancer treatment by checking your mouth for loose teeth and any signs of injury, decay or gum disease. If you are going to have chemotherapy, your treatment may be delayed if you are at risk of oral infections and/or complications once your treatment has started.

Your dentist can also prescribe preventative treatments and check on your oral hygiene techniques to make sure that you are keeping your mouth, teeth and gums in good condition throughout your treatment. If you wear dentures, it is important that they continue to fit properly too – especially if you lose a lot of weight.

During and after your bowel cancer treatment, your dentist will continue to work as part of your specialist multi-disciplinary team, providing support and advice and prescribing treatment for infections or complications in the mouth, if they arise.



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