

Cancer Can Trigger Emotional Eating

Nurture body and soul with comfort and high-nutrition foods.

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can trigger a cascade of emotions, from sadness to guilt, anger to anxiety. These responses typically change relationships to food, leading to over or under eating. It's not unusual to want comfort foods at such a time, but many patients feel guilty if the food is a low nutrition choice like gooey mac and cheese or sweet, cool ice cream.

Carolyn Katzin, MS, CNS, Integrative Oncology Specialist, UCLA Simms/Mann Center, assesses nutritional needs of cancer patients. While nutritional needs certainly change, especially when patients undergo chemotherapy treatments, she notes that comfort foods play an important role in the well-being of cancer patients.

"It's not so much the food we are seeking," explains Katzin, "but the desire to be in a safe environment."

Comfort foods guide us back to childhood, when we felt safe and happy—a time when a loved one provided nurturing food that fed body and soul. That's why the impulse to have comfort food shouldn't be denied, according to Katzin. Soup, be it chicken or bone marrow broth, was and continues to be a popular food-as-medicine choice. The calming warmth of soup and the loving hands that made it can be very helpful for those who have cancer.

"People want to help but often don't know how," says Katzin. "Ask a friend or loved one to buy organic bones to make broth. It's easy to freeze that broth into cubes to make it readily available at any time."

Enjoying other childhood favorites like mac and cheese or ice cream is fine so long as patients don't fall into the trap of using them to trigger binge eating.



Homemade soup provides comfort during difficult times.

Beyond comfort food: needed nutrients for cancer patients

Eating nutritional foods is vital to staying as strong as possible before, during and after cancer treatments. The treatments can rob the body of vital nutrients. Everyone's treatments and needs vary, but generally there are some key nutrients that are especially important.

Protein is the building block of cells. It helps repair damaged tissues and shores up the immune system. When the body doesn't get enough protein, it can take protein from muscle tissue. That can lower resistance to infection and slow the rate of recovery.

Some seniors, however, find it difficult to consume enough protein. As a general rule of thumb, Katzin recommends at least 60 grams of protein per day for people undergoing cancer treatment. Meat-based protein, such as from chicken or beef, can be hard to chew. Fish and eggs can be better choices because they are easier to chew and digest. Likewise, smoothies can be fortified with a variety of protein sources, including hemp, rice and pea or whey.

Get nutrients from food not supplements

It may be tempting to simply take a supplement instead of eating a food,

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Eat small**, easy to digest meals.
- **Ginger** may help prevent nausea.
- **Plan ahead** and keep read-to-drink meals handy.
- **Eat** in a relaxed environment.
- **Make a pretty plate** with garnishes such as lemon and parsley.
- **Avoid supplements** unless directed by a physician.

especially when nausea becomes a problem. That is not generally recommended. Some studies have shown an association between taking supplements and increased cancer risk and decreased effectiveness of treatment. Association does not mean causation, but it does signal the need for caution.

Several randomized controlled trials, some including only small numbers of patients, have investigated whether taking antioxidant supplements (e.g., vitamins E and C) during cancer treatment alters the effectiveness or reduces the toxicity of specific therapies. Although these trials had mixed results, some found that people who took antioxidant supplements during cancer therapy had worse outcomes, especially if they were smokers. Additional large randomized controlled trials are needed to provide clear scientific evidence about the potential benefits or harms of taking antioxidant supplements during cancer treatment. Cancer patients should inform their doctors about their use of any supplements to avoid side effects or possible negative interactions with other medications.

No adverse associations have been shown when people ate antioxidant-rich foods. All fruits and vegetables have antioxidants. The more colorful the produce, the higher the concentration of beneficial phytonutrients, and the better for health. ■