

Diet and nutrition

Eating well is essential to overall health and wellbeing. It can also help to prepare your body for lymphoma treatment, and in your recovery.

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We have separate information about the topics in **bold font**. Please get in touch if you'd like to request copies or if you would like further information about any aspect of lymphoma. Phone 0808 808 5555 or email information@lymphoma-action.org.uk.

What is a healthy diet?

Your diet should include:

- **fruit and vegetables**
- **carbohydrates**
- **protein** (including **dairy or dairy alternatives** as a source of protein)
- **fibre**
- **fat**
- **fluids.**

We give brief information about each of these below. You can find out more about [food types on the NHS website](#).

What are the recommendations on healthy eating?

The UK government sets out recommendations on healthy eating in their [Eatwell guide](#). You can also find guidance on [what to feed young children](#) on the NHS website.

If it is difficult for you to afford to buy food, you might be able to access some through a food bank. You can [find out more about food banks on the Government website](#).

If you have a balanced diet with all food groups, you wouldn't usually need to take additional supplements. If you are low in certain vitamins, such as B12 and folate, your clinical team will give you the supplements you need.

Chrissie Kirby, Haematology and Transfusion Nurse Specialist

Eatwell guide

The Eatwell Guide below is available to [download on the UK Government website](#). This version is for people whose diet does not restrict any food groups.

The Vegetarian Society produce an [Eatwell guide for people who follow a vegetarian diet](#) that does not contain fish or meat.

The Vegan Society produce an [Eatwell guide for people who follow a vegan \(plant-based\) diet](#).



Fruit and vegetables

Fruits and vegetables give you **fibre, vitamins and minerals**.

The recommendations are to eat at least 5 portions (of around 80g each) of different fruits and vegetables per day. A 30g portion (1 tablespoon) of dried fruit also counts as one portion.

As a rough guide, the following examples count as one portion:

- an apple, banana, slice of melon or a handful or two of berries
- 3 heaped tablespoons of cooked vegetables or cooked, tins of cooked pulses or beans
- 7 cherry tomatoes or a cereal bowl of salad leaves.

The NHS website gives more information about **what counts as one of your five a day**.

The World Cancer Research Fund also produce a set of resources that you can download free of charge. These include posters on [what counts as a 5 a day portion for adults](#) and [what counts as a 5 a day portion for children](#). You can also download or order a copy of their guide on [eating well during cancer](#).

Carbohydrates (starchy foods)

Carbohydrates ('carbs') are the main way your body gets energy. They provide [fibre, vitamins and minerals](#).

Carbohydrates should make up around a third of your daily food intake.

Foods high in carbohydrates include:

- rice, potatoes, bread and pasta – brown, wholegrain or wholemeal varieties provide more fibre than other options
- grains, such as quinoa and cous cous.

Protein

Your body needs protein to grow and repair itself, as well as for muscle strength and [immune system](#) functioning.

You might need more protein than usual to help your body heal during and after your [lymphoma treatment](#). If you are losing weight, ask [your medical team](#) how to make sure you are getting all the nutrients you need. If it is appropriate for you to gain weight, [they can help you to do so safely](#).

Foods that are high in protein include [meat](#), fish, eggs and [dairy products](#). Plant-based foods include beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, nut butters, hummus, tofu and meat substitutes made from a plant-based protein called mycoprotein.

[White fish is a good source of protein. There are also lots of nutrients in oily fish, such as salmon, trout and mackerel.](#)
Chrissie Kirby, Haematology and Transfusion Nurse Specialist

Meat

If you eat meat, healthy choices are those that have little fat (sometimes labelled on packaging as 'lean'), grilled cuts of fresh, unprocessed white meats, like chicken and turkey without the skin on.

Meat can be a good source of vitamin B12, which helps to keep blood cells and nerves healthy. However, you can also get B12 through dairy products, fish and pulses.

Chrissie Kirby, Haematology and Transfusion Nurse Specialist

What about red meat?

Red meat (such as beef, lamb and pork) is also a good source of protein and minerals such as iron and zinc. However, the UK government recommends that you limit the amount of red and processed meats (foods that are smoked, cured or have had salt or chemical preservatives added to them) to 70g per day. There is information about [meat in your diet on the NHS website](#).

You can find information about [red meat and processed meat on the World Cancer Research Fund's website](#).

Dairy and dairy alternatives

It is recommended that you include [dairy products or dairy alternatives](#) in your diet. These provide calcium (which is important for bone health) and zinc (a mineral with various functions, including helping wounds to heal) and protein. They can also be a good source of vitamin B12.

Milk, yoghurt and cheese are a good source of dairy. If you are [lactose intolerant](#) or follow a [vegan diet](#), you can meet your calcium requirements with calcium-fortified non-dairy alternatives, such as coconut milk, dairy-free yoghurts and soya products.

Some dairy products are generally healthier than others. For example, vegetable-oil spreads are lower in [saturated fat](#) than butter. However, if you are trying to gain weight, your medical team might advise that you eat some higher-fat dairy or dairy alternative products.

As with anything, it's about moderation. While spreads tend to be lower in fat than butter, they are more processed. Some people choose grass-fed butter over regular butter as it can be high in healthy fats and contains fewer additives.

Chrissie Kirby, Haematology and Transfusion Nurse Specialist

Fibre

Fibre helps with the health of your heart and digestion. Foods that come from plants are usually high in fibre, for example fruits, vegetables, cereals and potatoes. Aim to eat 30g of fibre each day. The [NHS website gives tips to help get more fibre in your diet](#).

Fat

There are [different types of fat](#). Often, people mean [saturated fat](#) when they talk about fat.

Although some people think of fat as 'bad', it is important in giving you energy, and vitamins. Our bodies also need [essential fatty acids](#) to work well.

If you are trying to gain weight, your medical team might advise that you eat some higher-fat [dairy or dairy alternative products](#).

Unsaturated fats

Unsaturated fats help to keep your heart healthy and lower your [cholesterol](#).

These often come from plant-based foods such as seeds, nuts, olives, and avocados. You can also include them in your diet by using spreads or oils made from corn, olive, rapeseed, sunflower, soya, or sesame.

Essential Fatty Acids (omega-3 and omega-6 fats)

Although there is no government recommendation on how much, you need to eat a small amount of essential fatty acids ([omega-3 fats](#) and [omega-6 fats](#)) for your body to work properly. The outer layer (membrane) of every type of cell in your body is made from them. They are also needed for your heart and brain to function well.

You can get omega-3 fats by eating:

- oily fish, such as sardines, salmon or mackerel
- walnuts, flaxseeds and linseeds
- green, leafy vegetables.

Some foods (such as eggs or fish products) might also be fortified with omega-3.

If you don't eat fish, you can still get omega-3 by eating seeds, nuts, tofu and vegetables like broccoli and spinach.

Chrissie Kirby, Haematology and Transfusion Nurse Specialist

You can get omega-6 fats by eating:

- nuts – raw or unflavoured are the healthier choice
- seeds
- vegetable oils or spreads, such as rapeseed, corn, or sunflower.

If you do not eat fish, then you are able to obtain omega 3 by eating seeds, nuts, tofu and vegetables like spinach.

Saturated fats

Limit your intake of saturated ('sat') fats. This type of fat is found in foods such as fatty cuts of meat, cakes, and many processed foods, such as sausages and crisps. Too much saturated fat increases health risks including **heart disease** and **stroke**.

The UK Government recommends that:

- adult females should eat no more than 20g of saturated fat a day
- adult males should eat no more than 30g of saturated fat a day
- children should eat less than this, although they do not give a specific amount.

If you are trying to gain weight, your medical team might advise that you choose some foods that have a higher fat content. For example, dairy foods that are high in energy, such as full cream milk or full fat yogurts.

Check the [food labels on packaging](#) to see how much of each type of fat it has in it. There are also apps available to help you to check nutritional content, for example, the [government's food scanner app](#).

Drinks

The general recommendation is to drink around 1.5 to 2 litres (roughly 6 to 8 glasses) each day. It's particularly important to drink plenty if you are losing extra water from your body, as is usually the case in the summer months. You will also need more water if you have [symptoms of lymphoma](#) such as sweating, or [side effects of treatment](#), such as [sickness \(vomiting\)](#) and [diarrhoea](#). Drinking plenty of fluids can also help to ease [constipation](#), and to improve urinary or bladder problems.

All types of fluid count, except for alcohol. Tea and coffee contain caffeine – for which there is mixed evidence about whether it makes you wee more (has a diuretic effect).

I advise patients not to have only tea or coffee as part of their fluid intake each day. Try to drink water and, if you don't enjoy plain water, try sparkling or adding sugar free squash or flavoured low sugar alternatives.

Chrissie Kirby, Haematology and Transfusion Nurse Specialist

How lymphoma might affect your eating

Some lymphoma treatments can cause side effects that make it difficult for you to eat as you usually would. For example, you might experience [bowel problems](#) (such as [diarrhoea](#) or [constipation](#)) or [sickness \(nausea and vomiting\)](#). You might have [changes in taste](#), or struggle to eat because of a [lower appetite or feeling full soon after you start to eat](#). If you experience dry, [sore mouth \(oral mucositis\)](#) as a side effect, symptoms such as mouth ulcers might make it painful to eat and drink. It can be helpful to try to [reduce irritation to your mouth](#), for example, by eating soft foods and avoiding citrus fruits.

The realities of treatment and side effects can make it difficult to eat. Sometimes, even a sip of water can be a challenge. If you feel sick, have lowered appetite, mouth ulcers or your sense of taste and smell are affected, you could set yourself little targets. For example, drinking a small glass of water or eating a piece of toast. This can be less overwhelming than a large plate of food.

Corrin, diagnosed with diffuse large B-cell lymphoma

In some cases, the position of the lymphoma might make you feel full more quickly than usual and not want to eat very much. This could happen, for example, if the lymphoma is in your [spleen](#) or tummy (abdomen). Some people who have an [donor \(allogenic\) stem cell transplant](#) might have lower appetite if [graft-vs-host disease](#) develops in their gut.

[The emotional impact of living with lymphoma](#) can also have an impact on eating.

If you struggle to eat or drink:

- **Speak to a member of your [medical team](#).** They can offer you advice. In some cases, they might offer you a referral to a dietitian, who can give you specific guidance about how to improve your nutritional intake. There is more information about the role of a dietitian in our [frequently asked questions](#) section.
- **Do not take any supplements without seeking medical advice** as some could interact with lymphoma treatments and other medications in unwanted ways.

We offer some tips below, and you'll find more in our [living with and beyond lymphoma](#) book. You might also be interested in the [top tips for healthy eating](#) that our Facebook group members have shared.

Changes in taste

A possible side effect of some [chemotherapy](#) and some [targeted treatments](#), is that food tastes different. During your treatment, you might also be more at risk of developing [infections](#), such as [mouth \(oral\) thrush](#). This can make food that you usually like taste strange.

Many people say food tastes bland to them during treatment for lymphoma. Other people describe a metallic taste in their mouth, with some foods (particularly beef) tasting metallic. It's also quite common for food to taste salty, bitter or sweeter than usual, or you might find that it doesn't taste of much.

During treatment, my taste could change from one day to the next. I found that eating small bites was helpful, trying different tastes like crackers, small jacket potatoes, soup. It was helpful to have family members and friends who tried to understand this and support me.

Corrin, diagnosed with diffuse large B-cell lymphoma

The effects of treatment on your taste can change over time. For example, foods that you didn't enjoy earlier in your treatment might start to taste good again, although this can take some time. Once you finish treatment, taste changes should start to fade away.

If you're losing weight, ask your medical team for advice to help you to get enough energy and nutrients through your diet, and to prevent further weight loss.

If your food doesn't taste of much, you could try:

- adding herbs, spices, sauces, dressings, pickles, yeast extract and chutneys
- drizzling fruit sauces onto desserts or adding berries.

If changes in taste affect your enjoyment of drinks, you could try:

- 'sharp' tasting fizzy drinks, such as lemonade or ginger beer
- herbal teas if you stop enjoying tea and coffee during treatment for lymphoma.

Lower appetite or feeling full soon after you start to eat

Some lymphoma treatments can lower your appetite or make you feel full soon after you start to eat.

This can happen:

- as a side effect of **chemotherapy**
- if you have lymphoma in your gut (gastrointestinal tract) or spleen

- if you have **radiotherapy** to your gut
- due to **the emotional impact of lymphoma**, like heightened anxiety and **stress**.

Tips you might like to try if your appetite is low or you feel full soon after you start to eat:

- **eat little and often** with snacks between meals
- **try not to drink too much too soon before you eat** – you might find it helps not to drink for around 30 minutes before your food
- **choose foods that are high in energy and protein** – this can help if you are losing weight due to lymphoma and its treatment
- **if you are eating out, order a smaller portion** – you could order a starter, side dish or something from the children’s menu
- if you are struggling to eat enough, talk to a member of your medical team for advice.

Boosting energy and protein if you need to gain weight

If you need to gain some weight, it can be helpful to eat foods that are high in energy and **foods that are high in protein**.

Examples of foods that are high in energy:

- avocados, bananas, and sweet potato
- oats and seeds
- cheese or dairy free cheese alternatives
- nut butters
- full-fat milk-based products, for example whole milk and yoghurt
- full-fat dairy-free products, such as coconut milk and yoghurt.

You can add more energy to your food by using products such as olive oil and butter when you cook. Milk powder or vegan alternatives can be added to cold puddings such as mousses.

Cancer Research UK has suggestions for high-energy drinks that you can try making yourself, as well as those that you can buy.

Examples of foods and products that are high in protein:

- meat, fish, eggs

- meat alternatives like tofu, seitan and soya
- beans, lentils, chickpeas and other pulses or legumes
- dairy products like milk, cheese and yoghurt
- fortified almond milk, fortified oat milk, and soya milk.

Cancer Research UK has more [suggestions for boosting energy and protein](#) levels.

Macmillan Cancer Support also has information about cancer and weight loss, including about [the building up diet](#) – this is high in energy and protein, and designed to help people who have lost or are losing weight, or who find it difficult to eat enough.

What can I do if I am gaining weight?

Weight gain can be a side effect of some [steroid treatments](#) – this can happen [whether you eat more than usual or not](#).

In general, it's best to avoid dieting during treatment as it can make it harder for your immune system to recover. Your height and weight are also important in calculating treatment doses.

Instead of dieting, focus on eating a healthy diet, doing [exercise](#), and giving your body energy to help with your recovery. Ask your medical team for advice if you are unhappy with your change in weight.

What can I do if I am struggling to keep my weight?

There can be many reasons for difficulties in keeping weight, for example, [changes in taste](#), a [lower appetite](#), and heightened [stress](#).

Speak to your medical team if you are struggling to keep your weight. This is important, so that they can give you advice to help you get the nutrients you need. In some cases, this might include referring you to a dietitian. You can read more about how a dietitian could support you in our [frequently asked questions](#) section.

Frequently asked questions about lymphoma, food and nutrition

We answer some common questions people have about lymphoma, food and nutrition. Speak to your medical team for advice specific to your situation.

Should I follow a certain diet?

Ask your medical team for advice specific to your situation, including about any foods to avoid. The general guidance for people affected by lymphoma is the same as it is for people who are not affected by lymphoma – to eat a [healthy, balanced diet](#) as far as you are able to, and to drink enough [fluids](#). You can find guidance and information on the [British Association of Dietetics website](#).

You might also be interested in information about [eating well with cancer](#), available on the NHS Wessex Cancer Alliance website.

Are there certain foods or drinks that could help cure lymphoma?

There is no evidence that any foods can prevent or treat cancer – be wary of claims that it can.

Cancer Research UK has information about [alternative cancer diets](#), including Gerson therapy (coffee enemas) and macrobiotic diets (which aims to avoid foods containing toxins). They advise against following an alternative cancer diet. This is because, in addition to the lack of scientific evidence to say that any are effective, some could make you very unwell and lead to a lack of nutrients.

You might also be interested in [Cancer Research UK's information about cancer myths](#).

Should I take supplements?

The general guidance is to eat a [healthy balanced diet](#). However, if you have [difficulties eating](#), your doctor might advise you to take an additional general multivitamin and mineral supplement. It's important to check with a member of your medical team before taking any supplements. This is because some could be harmful if they react with lymphoma treatment or any other medications.

How could a dietitian help me?

If necessary, your medical team might refer you to a dietitian. A dietitian can help you to find ways to meet your nutritional requirements. They base this on a range of factors including your lymphoma treatment and food preferences.

A dietitian can give ideas about meals and snacks that could help you, as well as how to prepare them – for example, using a vegetable oil or adding butter. They can give advice if you are having difficulties with eating, or if you are losing weight. You might also be recommended to try a nutritional supplement (for example, if your body is unable to absorb nutrients properly) or a particular meal replacement drink.

The British Dietetic Association has more information about [what a dietitian could do for you](#).

Are there foods I should avoid if my immune system is lowered?

If you have a low number of a type of white blood cell (neutrophils), doctors describe you as having [neutropenia](#). This means it's harder for you to fight infection. Speak to your medical team for advice about any foods you should avoid to help lower your [risk of infection](#). You might also be interested in [our information about food hygiene and safety](#).

Will sugar make my lymphoma worse?

There is no evidence that eating sugar makes lymphoma grow. There are also no research findings to say that if you do not eat sugar, your lymphoma will go away.

However, eating a lot of sugar brings other health risks, including [obesity](#) and [diabetes](#), which have been linked to the development of other cancer types.

A [healthy diet](#) means eating sugar in moderation. In general, sugary foods (like cakes, chocolate and biscuits) don't provide much nutritional goodness. They can also lead to weight gain.

If you are losing weight without trying to, your medical team might suggest that you temporarily increase your intake of foods that are high in sugar and fat.

Cancer Research UK has more information about [sugar and cancer](#). You can also read about [cancer diet myths](#) on the Association of UK Dieticians website.

I follow a vegetarian/vegan diet – how can I meet nutritional guidelines?

You can meet [nutritional guidelines](#) if you follow a vegetarian or vegan diet. Make sure that you get enough [iron](#), too. You can do this by eating pulses and dark green, leafy vegetables.

If you eat a vegan diet, you should also consider taking a B12 vitamin supplement to avoid developing a deficiency. There is [information about B12](#) on The Vegan Society's website. However, your medical team should check your B12 levels and advise you.

[The Vegan Society](#) and [The Vegetarian Society](#) give further information relevant to these diets.

Should I eat organic foods?

Some people choose to eat an organic diet because they are concerned about any traces of [chemicals](#) such as pesticides and herbicides left in food. Organic food is made with restrictions on the use of man-made (synthetic) fertilisers and pesticides. In the UK, this is set by the [Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs \(DEFRA\)](#).

There are still rules about the levels of chemicals allowed in growing foods that are not grown according to organic standard. These levels are checked and reviewed with the aim of keeping them well below the level considered to be safe.

What have scientists learnt about organic foods?

There is no good quality evidence to support that eating organic foods can prevent cancer or stop cancer recurring.

Some research shows that there are higher levels of antioxidants (for example certain vitamins and minerals) in organic crops. Antioxidants can help to lower damage to cells. However, there is not yet research to say whether eating more antioxidants in food lowers the risk of developing cancer. It's also important to note that taking antioxidant supplements could have harmful effects on your health. For example, they could interfere with your lymphoma treatment or other medicines.

- A [review of 17 studies](#) of 733,954 people found that eating a lot of organic food was not associated with the risk of non-Hodgkin lymphoma when compared to low consumption of organic foods.

- A **UK study** of over 600,000 middle-aged women found little or no decrease in cases of cancer associated with eating organic food. An exception was in relation to a small, possible effect in the case of **non-Hodgkin lymphoma** (NHL). However, further investigation is needed.
- A **study carried out in France** looked at 69,000 people. It found a lower risk of cancer in those who ate the most organic foods compared to those who ate the least. The largest effect was seen with lymphoma, particularly non-Hodgkin lymphoma. As the number of cases was very low, however, scientists are unable to draw conclusions.

Is it safe to eat grapefruit?

Some foods affect how well drugs work. Your body needs to break down drugs and absorb them into your blood stream before they can start to work. Enzymes are in every cell in your body and help to speed up this process.

One enzyme that is particularly important in breaking down drugs is CYP3A. Foods that block the action of these enzymes lower how much of the drug is absorbed into your body, making it less effective.

Grapefruit can block CYP3A. You might, therefore, be advised to avoid eating grapefruit or drinking grapefruit juice while you are having lymphoma treatment.

Other fruits that might block CYP3A include Seville oranges, blackberries, pomegranates and some varieties of grape. This includes juice from these fruits, and other foods that are made mostly from these, for example, orange marmalade.

Your consultant can advise you on whether to avoid particular foods and drinks based on your specific treatment.

Is green tea helpful for people with lymphoma?

Some laboratory studies suggest that green tea could have the potential to prevent some cancers from developing and to stop cancer cells from growing. This might be because of high levels of antioxidants in green tea. However, the evidence is mixed and much more research is needed with human participants before we can draw firm conclusions.

Check with your doctors whether green tea could affect your lymphoma treatment or any medications you are taking. For example, researchers have reported that green tea could stop the drug [bortezomib](#) working as well as it would do otherwise. However, as the findings come only from laboratory studies, more research is needed to tell whether this also applies to humans.

You can read more about [green tea on the Cancer Research UK website](#).

Can Echinacea (purple cornflower) help me?

Echinacea is sometimes thought to boost immunity, fight cancer, and improve some of the side effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. However, there is no evidence to support this.

If you would like to take Echinacea, speak to a member of your medical team first to check that it is safe for you. If you do decide to take it, make sure that you buy it from a reputable seller. You can read more [read more about Echinacea](#) on the Cancer Research UK website.

Can Manuka honey help me?

Manuka honey is made from the nectar of the manuka tree, which is native to New Zealand and Australia. Some early studies suggest that Manuka honey could be helpful in preventing and treating some types of breast cancer. However, the research has been done only in a laboratory. More research is needed to tell whether the findings apply to humans.

Is it safe to eat burnt or charred foods?

Some people ask if burnt or charred foods can cause cancer because of acrylamide. Acrylamide forms when you cook food at a high temperature – and foods that are ‘charred’ or burnt have higher levels than those that are lighter in colour.

Cancer Research UK states that ‘there is no reliable evidence that eating acrylamide increases the risk of cancer in people’ – you can read more about [acrylamide and cancer risk](#) on their website.

Is it safe to diet while I am having treatment for lymphoma?

Generally, doctors recommend that you do not try to lose weight during treatment. Restricting your nutritional intake or cutting out food groups can make it harder for your immune system to recover from treatment. If you are thinking of dieting, speak to your doctor for advice on whether it is safe to do so.

Can I eat out?

If you have a low number of neutrophils ([neutropenia](#)), take extra care to follow [food safety](#) advice when eating out. You can [check the food hygiene ratings of pubs, clubs, takeaways, restaurants and food shops on the Food Standards Agency website](#).

References

The full list of references for this page is available on our website. Alternatively, email publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk or call 01296 619409 if you would like a copy.

Acknowledgements

- Chrissie Kirby, Haematology & Transfusion Clinical Nurse Specialist, Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.
- We would like to thank the members of our Reader Panel who gave their time to review this information.

Content last reviewed: July 2025
Next planned review: July 2028
LYMweb0081DietNutrition2025v5

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Company Registration No 03518755

Charity Registration (England and Wales) No 1068395 (Scotland) No SC045850



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