

# Eating after abdominal surgery



## **About this leaflet**

Following your bowel surgery it can take a little time for your body to adjust. Your appetite may be reduced and your bowel habit altered. Eating a varied, balanced diet and making careful food choices will help to speed up your recovery.

This leaflet aims to answer some of the common questions you may have about your diet.

## **What do I eat while in hospital?**

Immediately after your operation you may be Nil by Mouth. When recommended by the surgical team, you will progress from sips of water to clear fluids (water, squash, weak, black tea/coffee) and then to free fluids (tea, coffee, fruit juice and milk drinks).

You will then start to increase your intake and progress to soup, jelly, ice-cream and custard, before starting to include more solid foods into your diet. Everyone is different and some people will progress more rapidly than others.

Once you are able to eat more solid foods:

- chew food well
- choose lower fibre carbohydrate foods eg white bread, white pasta, rice crispies, cornflakes, white rice, mashed potato, jacket potato (no skin), rice pudding, sponge pudding
- include protein foods eg eggs, milky puddings, yoghurt, tender meats, fish, poultry, cheese
- introduce fruit and vegetables gradually, starting with soft or cooked versions eg cooked carrots, stewed apples and tinned peaches. Avoid skins, pips and seeds.

If you are struggling to make choices from the main menu ask the host for the Back to Eating Menu which provides lighter, low fibre choices.

## **What do I eat when I get home?**

Everyone is different and it may take some trial and error to get your diet back to normal. Unless advised otherwise, when you go home you do not need to follow a special diet but you can choose a variety of foods from the different food groups: carbohydrates (starches and sugars), proteins, and fats. This will ensure that your body gets all the essential nutrients it needs.

Following the eating principles above, gradually increase the fibre content of your diet and reintroduce beans, lentils and wholemeal breads back into your diet after a few weeks.

## **How much should I drink?**

Fluids are important to keep hydrated. As a guideline most people need 3-4 pints (1½ - 2 litres) per day, but this depends on the individual. If you have had stoma surgery your stoma nurse will advise you about fluid intake.

## **What if my appetite is poor?**

- Have small meals with snacks in between.
- Eat at regular times to help regulate your appetite.
- Plan meals in advance using convenience foods or frozen meals if you are feeling tired.
- Avoid drinking before meals as it can fill you up.
- Eat little and often – avoid large portion sizes which can be overwhelming.
- Try to get some fresh air and keep mobile.

## **What if I have lost weight?**

Follow the tips above for a poor appetite and choose foods with a higher energy content such as full cream milk, full fat yoghurts and sweetened drinks. You can add extra energy to food by adding butter/margarine, cream, grated cheese, mayonnaise, ice-cream, honey, syrup, or jam.

Your doctor may prescribe nutritional supplement drinks for you for a limited time or you can make your own nourishing drinks such as hot chocolate, milkshakes with flavouring and ice-cream. Complan™, Meritene™ or similar products may be helpful.

## **What if I have diarrhoea?**

Limit the following foods:

- wholegrain cereals, wholemeal bread and granary/seeded breads
- nuts, seeds, pips, pith, pulses and skins
- muesli
- large amounts of fruit and vegetables. Limit to 3 servings a day and a small glass of diluted fruit juice
- drinks that contain caffeine, sorbitol (this is an artificial sweetener) or alcohol
- hot and spicy foods.

Do not reduce your fluid intake.

Introduce some starchy foods to help thicken your stools. These include white bread, pasta, mashed/boiled potato, white rice, rice pudding, sago, tapioca, Ready Brek, porridge and ripe bananas.

If the problem persists speak to your nurse or doctor who may be able to prescribe medication to help. If prescribed, take your antidiarrheal medication as directed.

## **What if I suffer from wind?**

In the first few months after your operation, you may find that certain foods give you excessive wind. To reduce this:

- eat slowly, chew food well and keep your mouth closed while you eat
- avoid fizzy drinks, beer and lager
- avoid drinking through a straw
- be cautious with 'windy' foods. Avoid these foods for a day or two and then gradually reintroduce onions, spicy foods, beans, cucumber, broccoli and cabbage.

## **What if I have constipation?**

Make sure you are drinking enough fluids. Have at least 3-4 pints a day. Include fibre containing foods such as:

- wholemeal or wholegrain cereals eg Weetabix, porridge, bran flakes
- wholemeal bread
- fruit and vegetables.

If the problem persists speak to your nurse or doctor who may be able to prescribe medication to help.

## **What if I have a colostomy or ileostomy?**

Your stoma nurse or dietitian will provide further information about the dietary aspects of stoma care.

Following discharge you can contact the stoma nurses on 01872 252700.

## **What if I need more guidance?**

Please feel free to ask your ward nurse or a specialist nurse if you require further information. They will provide you with their contact details.

## **What if I want to see a dietitian?**

Ask your doctor or specialist nurse to refer you to a dietitian if you continue to struggle with your diet following colorectal surgery. This might be because of on-going weight loss, the additional restrictions of a long standing diet (eg gluten free, vegan, puree) or on-going problems with a high output stoma or watery diarrhoea.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

