

Healthy Eating Strategies for Caregivers

Supporting and caring for a person with cancer is often time-consuming and requires a lot of effort. Because of the stress and lack of time, caregivers are more likely to seek comfort from processed or sugary foods or overeat, which in moderation, can be a quick and effective way to feel a little bit better. Unfortunately, eating this way typically only helps us feel better in the short-term and, chronically, can cause long term health problems.

As a caregiver, healthy eating can help you maintain both your physical and emotional health while managing the stressors of caregiving. There's also the added benefit of sharing healthy meals with the person you're caring for. **So what does healthy eating as a caregiver look like?**

Healthy eating as a caregiver means:

01

Understanding and reflecting on your eating habits

02

Recognizing barriers to eating healthy

03

Incorporating nutrient-rich foods into your diet

This guide will walk you through how to assess your eating habits and practice *mindful eating*. It will also help you come up with a strategy to incorporate nutrient rich foods into your diet, while cutting back on on unhealthy foods and eating practices. Remember, adopting healthy eating strategies can be challenging, especially as a caregiver. So, be kind to yourself as you start to practice and develop this skill.

Caring for and nurturing your own health as a caregiver ensures that you're always there to support your loved one, and yourself.



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1 Understanding and reflecting on your eating habits

Thinking about what it feels like before and after eating can help you start to develop *mindful eating practices*. Mindful eating involves listening to your body, and in particular your hunger signals. Typically, this is a feeling of emptiness or pain when we are hungry, or feeling stuffed or full, when we're full.



What does it feel like when you are hungry? How does it feel when you are full?

Before snacking or eating next time, try checking-in with your body. Recognizing these feelings may be new to you, as you may not have noticed them before or haven't thought about eating this way.

Another way to practice mindful eating is to reflect on how often you eat and what you're eating. Consider asking yourself:

- How often do you eat meals at regular times?
- Do you ever skip meals? If so, how frequently?
- How frequently are you snacking?
- If you are snacking, what are you choosing to eat?
- Are you drinking water throughout the day, or do you opt for sugary or caffeinated beverages?

The following chart shows when you might experience feelings of hunger. But remember, the times when you feel hungry might be different. Consider using a chart like this to note the times of day when you're feeling hungry.



Trying to stick to a regular eating schedule (like 3 meals a day) can be helpful to develop mindful eating skills. If you're used to grabbing a quick snack, that can be a hard habit to break! One way to change your habits, without taking away snacking, is to swap in some easy-to-prepare nutrient-rich options (see suggestions on the next page). Not only does this add some healthy nutrients, it also typically keeps you feeling more full for longer.



What are some healthy snacks you enjoy?
What other snacks or foods could you incorporate?

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2 Recognizing barriers to eating healthy

Caregivers often say that lack of time is one of the top challenges they face when it comes to having adopting a healthy eating strategy. But, there are many other barriers you may be facing to achieve this goal. Identifying the barriers that you face can help to develop a plan that works best for you.



Which of the following barriers are you facing as a caregiver?

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION	POSSIBLE STRATEGIES
Lack of time	Busy schedules often make it hard to choose healthier options that may require preparation time	Prepare meals in bulk, order prepared meals, focus on quick to prepare recipes
Cost	Healthy foods can sometimes be more expensive to purchase	Use virtual coupons for major grocery stores, order in bulk, add canned vegetables (which are better than no vegetables)
Convenience	Processed and fast foods are readily available and require less preparation time	Convenience and time often go hand in hand. Making meal preparation easier will help to make eating healthy more convenient
Taste preferences	Many people prefer the taste of unhealthy foods, which are often high in sugar, salt, and fat	Choose recipes that you enjoy, try healthy “recreations” of classic fast food from social media
Lack of knowledge	Many people don’t know what constitutes a healthy diet or how to prepare healthy meals	The American Cancer Society and the Centers for Disease Control are great places to start learning!
Emotional eating	Stress, anxiety, and other emotions can lead to consuming comfort foods that are often unhealthy	Try “riding the wave” – wait 30 minutes before indulging and let yourself eat it if you're still craving it. Also try a different emotion regulation strategy before eating
Habit	Long-established eating patterns and habits can be hard to change	Make changes one step at a time (e.g., waiting 10 minutes before reaching for unhealthy snack, then 20 minutes) or try to incorporate one healthy food at breakfast, then lunch
Availability	Access to fresh, healthy foods might be limited where you live	Consider meal/grocery delivery services or buying in bulk every month and freezing, look into local farmers markets or produce stands
Social influences	Family, friends, and cultural practices can influence your eating habits	Set goals with your friends! Hold each other accountable and try to positively motivate each other

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3 Incorporating nutrient-rich foods into your diet

Below, we've included some nutritional tips and ideas. This includes recommendations from the American Cancer Society (ACS) and other science-based recommendations.

Try to add:

VARIETY OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES.

- Spinach
- Carrots
- Cabbage
- Broccoli
- Cauliflower
- Brussel Sprouts
- Soy products
- Legumes
- Onion
- Garlic
- Tomato products

WHOLE GRAINS.

- Brown Rice
- Oatmeal
- Whole-grain breads
- Whole wheat pasta

The U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommends getting at least half of your grains as whole grains.

Try to reduce:

- **Red and processed meats.** Red meat refers to unprocessed meat such as beef, veal, pork, lamb, mutton, horse, or goat meat, as well as minced or frozen meat. Processed meat has been transformed through curing, smoking, salting, fermentation or other processes to improve preservation or enhance flavor.
- **Reduce alcohol consumption.** Try to drink in moderation. Guidelines are 1 drink per day for women and 2 drinks per day for men.
- **Added sugars.** Sugar or sweeteners such as high-fructose corn syrup are often used in sugar-sweetened beverages and energy-dense foods. Aim for these types of calories to make up less than 10% of your diet.
- **Processed foods.** These are foods that have been processed significantly before you can buy it (e.g., packaged cookies, chips). Highly processed foods tend to be higher in fat, added sugars, refined grains and sodium.

If you need assistance coming up with a healthy eating strategy, please don't hesitate to reach out to a member of your Color care team.