

The role of diet and exercise in ovarian cancer

When you are diagnosed with ovarian cancer, you may have many questions about what you can and can't do. Diet and exercise are often important parts of people's lives and identities before diagnosis. However, once you are diagnosed there can be so many questions flooding your mind and so much medical information to digest that asking your healthcare team about your diet and exercise recommendations can become deprioritised, but it is still important to have these conversations with your healthcare team.

We see and hear a lot about the many benefits of a healthy diet and regular physical exercise, such as improved sleep, increased energy levels, and better mental health.¹ Beyond those universal benefits, it's even more important if you are getting treatment to think about your eating habits and to carefully plan your exercise.

Diet

Treatments such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy can not only impact your appetite, but they can also change the body's requirement for nutrients, and how the body digests and uses them.² Additionally, some of the main side effects of treatment, like nausea, sickness, diarrhoea, and a sore mouth, may make it incredibly difficult to eat as much as your body needs.²⁻⁴ So, how can you ensure you get enough vitamins and nutrients from your diet?

When it comes to what you should be eating either during or after treatment for ovarian cancer, there are no hard and fast rules. However, you should consult with your healthcare team to understand if there are any food items that are contraindicated by your treatment and that you should avoid. Still there are a few simple goals:²⁻⁴

- Eat a well-balanced, varied diet with lots of fruits and vegetables
 - If you are suffering from a sore mouth, avoid citrus fruits or tomato-based sauces



- Eat plenty of wholegrains and vegetables for sustained energy throughout the day
- Be flexible about making changes to your diet in case of side effects or changing nutrient requirements
- Try and maintain a healthy weight

The important thing is that you are aiming to maintain a healthy weight and eating a well-balanced diet. You may see supplements advertised on the internet that promise to make you feel better, but there isn't much evidence that they work. Instead, consider speaking to a dietician to learn more about how to meet your individual dietary needs, such as advice on meals that can help reduce the side effects of treatment.

Exercise

While it is crucial to listen to your body and rest when you need to, the evidence suggests that staying active can be beneficial if you are diagnosed with ovarian cancer.^{1,5,6}

Many people who go through treatment for ovarian cancer report side effects of extreme fatigue (being very tired) and high psychological stress, and while it may seem counter-intuitive, aerobic exercise, like walking or cycling, can actually help to make you feel less tired and stressed during treatment.⁶

Aside from helping to boost energy levels and minimise stress, engaging in physical exercise throughout your treatment regimen can help you to avoid muscle loss - an important goal during and after treatment. Patients who have more muscle mass are often able to look after themselves better,

can keep on working, and can continue to engage in other activities while undergoing treatment.⁷ They may also recover more quickly from cancer treatment.⁷

Whether you exercised regularly before your diagnosis or are introducing yourself to gentle exercise post-diagnosis, exercise plays an important role in the management of ovarian cancer and can have many benefits in your recovery, quality of life, and mental health.⁶

The level of exercise you can engage in may change over the course of your treatment. For example, you may be asked to do so-called “prehab” exercise to improve your fitness before surgery.⁸ Ask your healthcare team for more information – you may even be referred to a physiotherapist who will discuss what exercise plan is right for you.

References

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