

Why good nutrition is essential during cancer treatment

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, the focus often shifts to surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation therapy. However, the food and fluids a person consumes during this time play a powerful role in how well they cope with treatment, how quickly they recover, and how strong they remain throughout the journey.

Food provides the body with energy to perform daily activities and fight illness, protein to repair tissues and maintain muscle, vitamins and minerals to support immunity and healing, and fluids to prevent dehydration and maintain organ function.

Cancer treatment often increases the body's nutritional needs. At the same time, side effects such as nausea, vomiting, mouth sores, dry mouth, taste changes, fatigue, or difficulty swallowing can reduce food intake. This imbalance can quickly lead to weight loss and weakness if not addressed early. Poor nutrition can result in increased fatigue, delayed wound healing, higher risk of infections, reduced tolerance to chemotherapy or radiation, and longer recovery periods. Eating well strengthens the body so it can better withstand treatment and maintain quality of life.

One of the most serious risks during cancer treatment is the loss of muscle mass. Even when weight loss appears small, muscle may be lost quickly if protein intake is inadequate, leading to weakness, reduced mobility, and

longer hospital stays. Including protein-rich foods throughout the day is critical. Eggs, milk, yoghurt, cheese, beans, lentils, chickpeas, groundnuts, fish, poultry, and lean meats provide good sources of protein.

If red meat tastes unpleasant due to treatment-related changes, alternative protein options such as dairy products, legumes, or eggs can help. Even adding powdered milk to porridge or soups can boost protein intake.

A reduced appetite is common during cancer treatment. Waiting until you feel hungry may not be effective. Eating small meals every two to three hours and choosing nutrient-dense foods rather than large bulky meals can help. Smoothies enriched with yoghurt, milk, or nut butter and keeping ready-to-eat snacks nearby ensure you still receive essential nutrients. Sometimes, eating becomes more about nourishment than enjoyment, and even small portions contribute

to maintaining strength.

Preventing malnutrition

Malnutrition occurs when the body does not receive enough nutrients to function properly. It can develop gradually and may not always be obvious. Warning signs include unplanned weight loss, clothes becoming loose, feeling weaker than usual, loss of appetite, and frequent illness. Malnutrition can increase treatment side effects and may even interrupt cancer therapy, making early identification critical. If weight loss or difficulty eating occurs, it is important to inform your doctor or nurse immediately rather than waiting until the problem becomes severe.

Fluids are essential for preventing dehydration, supporting kidney function, managing constipation, and reducing fatigue. Drinking water regularly throughout the day is important. If plain water tastes unpleasant, try adding lemon slices, drinking diluted fruit juice, taking small frequent sips, or eating foods with high water content such as soups. Dehydration can worsen fatigue and nau-

sea, so staying hydrated is an important part of staying strong.

A registered dietitian is specially trained to support patients during cancer treatment. They can assess nutritional status, calculate calorie and protein needs, develop personalised meal plans, suggest supplements if necessary, and provide strategies to manage taste and appetite changes. Every patient's needs are different, and a dietitian can tailor advice based on treatment, weight, symptoms, and food preferences.

Emotional wellbeing

Food is not only physical nourishment; it is also emotional and cultural. Changes in appetite or taste can cause frustration, sadness, or anxiety. Some patients feel discouraged when they cannot eat as they used to. Approaching this period with flexibility and self-compassion is important, as preferences may change temporarily. Foods disliked during treatment may become enjoyable again afterward. Family members and caregivers can support patients by preparing smaller, more frequent meals, encouraging without forcing food, and being patient with changing preferences. A supportive mealtime environment can make a real difference.

After treatment

Once treatment ends, the body continues to recover, and good nutrition remains important. Balanced eating helps regain lost weight, rebuild muscle, restore energy levels, and support long-term health. For many patients, appetite and taste gradually improve, and continuing healthy eating habits supports full recovery.

The writer is the executive director, Uganda Cancer Institute

