



# Poor Appetite and Weight Loss

**People who have a chronic illness may experience a loss of appetite. If the loss of appetite leads to eating less food, and if this continues for a long period, serious weight loss, along with weakness and wasting away of fat and muscle, can occur.** Some patients with serious illness may develop weight loss even though they continue to eat normally, but the more common situation is that appetite loss and weight loss occur together.

**Both loss of appetite and weight loss can decrease a person's quality of life and increase the risk of complications like infections.** If you are concerned about your appetite or your weight, you should discuss it with your physician. There may be ways to help.

## What are the Causes of Poor Appetite?

Some chronic illnesses often cause a loss of appetite and loss of weight. This is true of some cancers, including:

- Head and neck cancer
- Colon cancer
- Ovarian cancer
- Stomach cancer
- Pancreatic cancer

**It also occurs in people with:**

- Chronic kidney disease
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD, which includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema)
- Heart failure
- Cirrhosis of the liver
- HIV/AIDS

**Appetite loss and weight loss may also occur from other conditions that may be experienced by people with chronic illness. These include:**

- Depressed mood
- Chronic and severe nausea or constipation
- Chronic infection
- Medications such as chemotherapy drugs and opioids

Sometimes, loss of weight occurs because of conditions that interfere with eating, whether or not you have a good appetite. Some of these conditions include:

- Change in the sense of smell or taste
- Mouth sores and mouth pain
- Dry mouth
- Difficulty swallowing

## What can you do to help?

Consider the following tips when your appetite is poor:

- Instead of sitting down to three large meals a day, plan to eat five or six small meals a day, and snack whenever you are hungry.
- If you notice that your appetite is better at certain times of the day, schedule a meal at that time.
- Try to eat in pleasant surroundings, and eat meals with family or friends.
- If you notice that the taste of some foods have changed and that certain tastes or flavors are better than others, plan your meals and snacks in a way that avoids the flavors you don't like and includes the flavors you do like.
- Try adding different kinds of spices and condiments to foods to make them more appealing.
- If the smell or taste of food makes you nauseous, eat food that is cold or at room temperature to decrease its odor and reduce its taste.

- If you have changes in taste, try sucking on a hard candy before eating a meal.
- If your family is involved in your care, be sure to tell them about any changes or preferences for one or another food or flavor so that they can help plan meals and snacks that you are more likely to eat.
- Keep your favorite foods on hand for snacking.
- If you are able to add cream, butter, peanut butter or gravy to some of your meals, this may add calories and taste.
- Liquid supplements are available in the pharmacy and might be useful if you can manage taking two to four cans each day; if you can, you should try several brands and flavors to find one that you like.
- If you are able to be physically active, you might try to schedule a walk or some other kind of exercise about an hour before a meal to improve your appetite.

## What Can Your Doctor Do To Help?

If your loss of appetite lasts a long time, or is associated with loss of weight or other symptoms like nausea or depression, you should discuss the problem with your doctor. Tests may be done to determine the cause of decreased appetite.

If you have a problem that can be treated, like mouth pain or nausea, your doctor may suggest a treatment in the hope that your appetite will improve.

Your doctor also may suggest a medication used specifically to improve appetite. There are several medications available, and if treatment like this is being considered, your doctor should explain the potential benefits and risks.

Your doctor may also be able to refer you to a registered dietitian to make specific recommendations about meal planning based on your situation.

## What to Tell Your Doctor at Your Office Visit

- Keep a record of what you eat and drink for 24 hours to share with your doctor.
- Is the decreased appetite severe or mild?
- Have you lost any weight? How much?
- Is the decreased appetite a new symptom?
- If so, did it start after an upsetting event, such as the death of a family member or friend?
- What other symptoms are present?

### Patient Education Series

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## *When your symptoms are managed, you will:*

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.