

Good nutrition after major trauma

Department of Nutrition & Dietetics

This leaflet explains more about eating well after suffering serious injury. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

Introduction

After major trauma, your body will take time to heal and you may need to have surgery. Good nutrition is a vital part of the recovery process and helps to ensure that bones and wounds heal quickly and you get all the energy and nutrients you need to take part in effective rehabilitation.

Maintaining a healthy weight

If you are not able to get out of bed for a while after your injury you will not be using your muscles very much. Therefore you should expect to lose some weight as a result of muscle wastage. Eating well can help to minimise this process, which will make your recovery easier. Make sure you still eat plenty, even if you are not very active, because your body needs energy and nutrients to heal.

You should try to maintain a healthy weight for your height (aim for a body mass index of 18.5 - 25kg/m²). If you are overweight, you should not actively try to lose weight by restricting your diet while you are in hospital, unless supervised by a dietitian, because this could prolong your recovery.

Energy

Even if you are unable to move around as much as you usually would, your body still needs energy (calories) to heal, to fight infections and to minimise muscle loss. Certain injuries and infections can cause a big increase in your energy demands, so you may be surprised how many calories you need to eat. This varies from person to person and your dietitian will be able to work out individual targets for you if needed.

If you are underweight and have a small appetite, aim to eat little and often. For example, if you are unable to manage three larger meals, aim to have three smaller meals with nourishing snacks in between. The hospital menus are coded to indicate which meals are more nutritious. Look for the energy-dense ('E') symbol.

The following snacks are available on the ward:

- Build-up milkshake and soup
- Yogurt
- Rice pudding
- Jelly
- Cereal
- Biscuits

- Cake
- Ice cream (only available on some wards)

Please ask nursing staff or a ward hostess if you would like any of these snacks.

Protein

A protein-rich diet will help your wounds to heal and can help to maintain or build up your muscles so that you are getting the most out of rehabilitation. Choose a variety of protein-rich foods and try to include a generous portion of protein at each meal time (at least 20g of protein). Look out for the high-protein coding (★) on the menu.

Protein-rich foods include:

- Lean meat
- Poultry
- Fish and sea food
- Eggs
- Milk, milkshakes and milk products such as cheese, yoghurt and quark
- Beans and pulses
- Quorn
- Nuts and seeds (including nut butters)

It can be more difficult to meet your protein requirements with a vegetarian or vegan diet. If you are concerned please discuss this with the dietitian.

Fluid

It is vital that you drink enough to keep your body well hydrated. You should normally drink at least six to eight glasses of non-caffeinated drinks per day (1500-2000ml). You may need more in hot conditions or if you have an infection or a large wound.

If you are having problems finishing your meals then avoid drinking immediately before eating because fluids before meals can fill you up. Aim to include nutritious fluids when possible, for example milky drinks, smoothies and juices. Avoid fizzy drinks before meal time or if you have a poor appetite, as these can make you feel full up and don't provide much nutrition.

Constipation

Constipation is a common problem for trauma patients, especially after surgery or when taking some pain control medications.

For healthy and regular bowels:

- Eat regularly to help stimulate the transit of food and waste.
- Include some high fibre foods each day (e.g., wholegrain cereal, wholemeal bread, digestive biscuits, fruit and vegetables)
- Drink plenty of fluids (see above)
- If you are able, move around as much as possible
- Some patients find that regular abdominal massage can relieve constipation
- Your doctor may prescribe medications (laxatives) to help with constipation.

The dietitian can provide additional information about the management of constipation if needed.

Micronutrients

It is important to eat a well-balanced diet to ensure you are getting the full range of micronutrients needed to make a full recovery. There are a number of important vitamins and minerals needed to make a good recovery from trauma, including vitamins A, C, D and E, selenium, magnesium, iron, calcium and zinc. If you are eating a varied diet you should be getting sufficient amounts of these from your diet. If you are not eating enough or if there are concerns about any particular nutrients, your doctor or dietitian can advise about supplements.

What if I am not able to eat or drink?

Some patients will not be able to eat or drink normally, for example people on breathing machines on intensive care, or if your injury affects your alertness or ability to swallow safely (for example a brain injury). In these cases you will normally have a nasogastric feeding tube (a small plastic tube which is placed through the nose and travels down into the stomach) and the dietitian will prescribe liquid feed according to your specific needs. For more information please speak to the dietitian.

What if I can't eat enough to maintain my weight?

It is not uncommon to have a poor appetite and lose weight after major trauma. The dietitian will assess how much you are managing and what you need, and may order extra snacks, higher energy meals or prescribe special nutritional supplements to ensure that you are getting all the nutrition that you need to make a good recovery. There are a wide range of different supplements in a variety of flavours, so if you don't like the one you've been offered please speak to your nurse or dietitian who may suggest an alternative.

What can my family and friends do to help me eat better?

There is nothing quite like home cooking, so if you are struggling to find foods that you like on the hospital menu you can have food brought in for you by family or friends. You should be able to store a small amount of food in the ward fridge as long as it is labelled with your name and the date. Be aware that this means we cannot guarantee food safety, so waiver forms are available from the nursing staff for you or your relative to complete if you wish to heat up food.

If your injuries make it difficult for you to feed yourself, you will be given help with feeding by nursing staff or volunteers. If your relatives would like to come in at mealtimes to assist with feeding this can be arranged - please speak to the nurse in charge.

If you are losing weight or struggling to eat full meals, here are some ideas of energy-rich snacks that you may like to try:

- Cakes or biscuits, crumpets or muffins.
- Small rolls, sandwiches, mini-pittas or croissants with butter/margarine and your favourite filling.
- Savoury pastry such as samosas, mini sausage rolls, pork pies or spring rolls
- Crackers with cheese
- Breadsticks, crisps, vegetable crudités or tortilla chips with sour cream dips, hummus or cream cheese.
- Jam/cream cakes, biscuits, iced buns, doughnuts, flapjacks, jam tarts.

If you have any concerns about your nutrition and feel that you would benefit from seeing the Dietitian please speak to your nurse or doctor who can refer you.

Useful sources of information

NHS Choices has an online tool for calculating your body mass index (BMI), available at:

<https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/loseweight/Pages/BodyMassIndex.aspx>

The British Dietetic Association (BDA) has food fact sheets on various subjects, including healthy eating, malnutrition, and eating well for less:

<https://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/home>

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your nutrition and feel it would help to see the dietitian please speak to your nurse or doctor who can refer you.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

