

# Eating enough to support your recovery from COVID-19

Nutrition and Dietetic Service

Information for Patients

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## Introduction

People recovering from COVID-19 may have a poor appetite and lose a lot of weight and muscle mass. This leaflet is a guide to help you to get better. It also gives advice on coping with some of the symptoms you may still be having weeks or months after the infection has gone, which is known as “long COVID”.

One way to gain weight and build up muscle is to eat foods that are high in energy and protein. Fortifying every day foods can increase the energy and protein content of what you eat. This means every mouthful you eat will be good for you.

There are no foods or supplements that will stop you getting COVID-19 or cure it, but eating a wide range of foods can help your immune system and recovery.

## Helpful hints for your diet

- Avoid ‘diet’, ‘low fat’ or ‘low calorie’ foods and drinks at this time as they will not give you as much energy.
- Add energy and protein to the foods you have, for example:
  - add extra butter e.g. to mashed potatoes, jacket potato, vegetables, toast, bread rolls, and crackers.
  - add milk powder to milk. Mix 2 to 4 tablespoons of milk powder into a pint of milk.
  - add grated cheese, cream cheese and cream to foods e.g. soups, sauces, curries.
  - use mayonnaise, salad cream or dressing in sandwiches and salads.
  - add honey, syrup or jams to porridge, milky puddings, toast, teacakes.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit [www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk) for maps and information about visiting Leicester’s Hospitals  
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact [InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)

- Try to include some foods which are high in protein. This includes meat, fish, eggs, beans, lentils, cheese, milk and yoghurts, tofu, Quorn and nuts.
- Take your time and relax. There is no need to rush your meal; it is fine to take a rest.
- Try having small portions, you can always go back for more.
- Make sure you have something at each meal time, even if your appetite is small.
- When your appetite is poor it helps to eat 'little and often', so try having something between meals. Think about having something to eat 5 to 6 times a day.
- Drinks can also help to provide the nutrition you need. Try a glass of full cream milk between meals, milkshakes, smoothies, malted milk drinks (Horlicks or Ovaltine) or hot chocolate.
- Powdered supplements made up with milk, such as Complan, Meritene, and Aymes Retail are available from most supermarkets and pharmacies. They can be used between meals and come in a variety of flavours.
- Eat more of the food you enjoy at the times of day when you feel most like eating.
- It is fine to use convenience foods from your cupboard or freezer if you don't feel like cooking, for example biscuits, soup, baked beans, ready meals, tinned puddings, custard.
- Have drinks after meals if you feel full easily.
- It is important to eat a varied diet if possible.

## Snack ideas

Below are some examples of snacks to have between meals:

Crisps	Full fat mousse
Nuts and seeds	Scone with butter and jam
Crackers and cheese	Bagel with cream cheese
Hummus or dips and bread sticks/ cheese straws	Bhajis
Pakorras	Spring rolls
Spring rolls	Croissants
Fruit and full fat yoghurt/ custard or milk jelly	Muffins
Biscuits, cakes, fun sized chocolate bars	Bombay mix
Trifle	Crisps
Sausage roll	Scotch egg
Crème caramel	Malt loaf
Toast with peanut butter	Full fat rice pudding
	Halva

## Store cupboard ideas

- Tinned and frozen food can be very good for you. Try tinned or frozen fish, potatoes, vegetables and fruits. They can be added to many meals and have a long shelf life.
- Canned soups, pastas and baked beans are useful to make a quick meal. Tinned meats and fish are a good protein source.
- Tinned and dried pulses are a good store cupboard protein source. Use chickpeas, lentils, beans in stews, curries and casseroles.
- Add extra butter to powdered potatoes to increase the energy content.
- Dairy products with a longer life (e.g. yogurt and milk) are a good option if you are unable to get a regular groceries shop. They often have extra vitamins and minerals. Long-life or tinned milk puddings (rice puddings, custards) make a nutritious dessert.

## Managing your symptoms with your diet

### Eating when short of breath:

You may find it more difficult to swallow and eat enough if you are short of breath:

- You may find it easier to eat softer, moist foods e.g. curries, casseroles, cottage pie, soups, extra sauces, gravy, milky puddings, fruit smoothies, ice creams.
- Aim to eat little and often, with small meals, snacks and nutritious drinks.

### Eating when your taste has changed:

It is common to find that your favourite foods do not taste the same after COVID-19. This can take weeks or months to return to normal:

- Try eating and drinking sharp tasting foods and drinks such as cranberry, lemon or lime.
- If food tastes metallic, a gargle of lemon juice in water may help, or try using plastic cutlery.
- Eat the foods that you like the taste of and avoid those that you do not. However it is important to retry the 'problem' foods again in a few weeks as your taste may have changed.
- Use stronger seasoning to add flavour to savoury foods, for example mustard, herbs, pepper.
- Add flavourings to pudding, for example nutmeg into rice pudding or custard, ginger and cinnamon to fruit pots and yoghurts.
- Marinating meat, chicken or fish before cooking may improve the flavour and tenderise the meat. Ideas for marinating include sweet and sour sauce, barbeque, soy sauce or wine.
- If you are struggling to eat red meat, other good sources of protein include turkey, chicken, fish, cheese, eggs, nuts, pulses, lentils and milk.
- Try adding pesto, garlic or sun dried tomatoes to pasta dishes.

**Dry mouth:**

- Choose softer or moist foods e.g. minced beef in shepherd's pie rather than pieces of dry meat.
- Suck sweets or mints or chew sugar-free chewing gum to increase saliva.
- Sip drinks frequently.
- Suck ice cubes or ice lollies.
- Make your food moist with sauces, gravy, custard or cream.
- Always make sure you keep your mouth clean and moist to avoid infections. Brushing your teeth before and after meals might help.
- Use alcohol-free mouthwash regularly.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine and smoking.
- Your doctor or nurse may prescribe some pastilles or saliva spray if the problem continues.

**Tiredness:**

You may find preparing meals tiring:

- If possible, ask for help with your shopping or use local delivery options e.g. milk man.
- Use store cupboard items with a longer life to reduce the need to shop.
- You could also use a meal delivery company such as Wiltshire Farm Foods or Oakhouse Foods.
- Have ready-meals.

**If you have an upset tummy:**

- Drink plenty of fluids, such as water or squash. Take small sips if you feel sick.
- Eat when you feel able to, and eating little and often may help.
- You don't need to eat or avoid any specific foods.
- If needed, seek advice from a pharmacist about oral rehydration solutions or medicine to stop any diarrhoea if you are struggling to stay hydrated.

**Monitoring your weight**

Weigh yourself regularly (once a week for example) and keep a record. If you are not able to weigh yourself, look for signs of weight loss, such as jewellery and clothes becoming looser.

If you continue to lose weight talk to your doctor, nurse or dietitian.

## Staying hydrated

Having enough to drink is important for good health. Adults are usually told to drink 6 to 8 mugs or large glasses a day. You will need to drink more than this if you have an infection. If you have a high temperature, if it is a warm day or during physical activity, you may need more too. Remember, this can include drinks such as milk if your appetite isn't good.

If you are struggling to drink, have foods with a high fluid content e.g. jelly, ice lollies, watermelon, cucumber, soup.

## Vitamin D

It is recommended that we take a 10 microgram supplement of vitamin D each day. You can buy this from any pharmacy or supermarket.

You can help your body get more vitamin D by eating plenty of vitamin D rich foods, including:

- oily fish such as salmon, sardines, pilchards, trout, herring and kippers.
- cod liver oil contains a lot of vitamin D. Don't take this if you are pregnant.
- egg yolk, meat, offal and milk contain small amounts but this varies with the seasons.
- margarine, some breakfast cereals and some yoghurts have added vitamin D.

## Keeping active

When you feel up to it, it is important that you try and do some physical activity.

There is helpful advice about exercise and physical activity on the NHS website which can be viewed from this link: [www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise)

## Can a low histamine diet help with long COVID symptoms?

Histamine is an inflammatory substance produced by cells in the body during an infection. It encourages an immune response to help fight off viruses and bacteria. Histamine also occurs naturally in foods.

Symptoms of histamine intolerance are similar to those reported by people living with long COVID. As yet, there is no reliable test that can diagnose histamine intolerance. It is not a food allergy; therefore, food allergy testing is not helpful.

There are suggestions that a low histamine diet may help with long COVID symptoms, however currently, there is a lack of evidence to support this. Therefore eliminating histamine from your diet is not currently recommended for long COVID management.

## What if I have diabetes or been told to follow a special diet?

If you have diabetes COVID-19 may affect your blood sugar control. Look for further information on [www.diabetes.org.uk](http://www.diabetes.org.uk)

If you have had advice from a health care professional to follow a special diet, you will need to carry on with this. If you are not sure how this will work with the advice given here, or are struggling with a part of your diet, please speak to your doctor, nurse or dietitian for help.

## Further information

- NHS England website - general information to support recovery after COVID-19:  
[www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk](http://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk)
- NHS England website - eating well when unwell with COVID-19 and for your recovery:  
[www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/your-wellbeing/eating-well/](http://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/your-wellbeing/eating-well/)
- The British Dietetic Association (BDA) - if you wish to explore more of the evidence around diet and COVID-19 recovery, or need support with your diet after COVID-19 visit:  
[www.bda.uk.com/resource/covid-19-corona-virus-advice-for-the-general-public.html](http://www.bda.uk.com/resource/covid-19-corona-virus-advice-for-the-general-public.html)



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