

# What to Eat and Drink After Gastrointestinal Surgery

**For patients who have had surgery on their gastrointestinal tract (stomach and intestines)**

Read this resource to learn:

- What should I eat and drink after surgery
- When you can return to your normal diet
- What are some side effects you may have after surgery
- When to get help from a Registered Dietitian

This resource was made by the Dietitians of the University Health Network (UHN). It was made to help you heal and stay safe after GI surgery.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Registered Dietitian: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

## **What should I eat and drink after surgery?**

### **Do I need to change what I eat and drink after GI surgery?**

Yes. After surgery you may not be able to eat or drink right away. When your body is ready, your doctor will likely tell you to follow a clear fluid diet for 1 to 3 days. This means you will not be able to eat solid foods.

Sometimes your doctor will tell you to follow a full fluid diet before eating solid foods. Your doctor suggests you follow a full fluid diet for days.

### **What is a clear fluid diet?**

A clear fluid diet only allows you to have items that are easy for your body to break down. Clear fluids leave little or no food in your GI tract.

Clear fluids include clear liquids and some liquids with colour. A clear fluid diet can include:

- Water
- Clear fruit juices (such as apple, grape or cranberry juice)
- Tea and coffee without milk or cream
- Sport drinks (such as Gatorade or Powerade)
- Jell-O
- Sherbet
- Popsicles
- Bouillon and consommé (clear soup)

- Clear carbonated (bubbly) liquids (such as club soda), if your body can handle it
- Honey and plain sugar

### **What is a full fluid diet?**

A full fluid diet includes all the items that you can have on a clear fluid diet and also includes:

- Milk
- Yogurt (plain or flavoured)
- Puddings
- Milkshakes
- Strained creamy soups
- Hot cereals like oatmeal or cream of wheat
- Nutrition supplements like Ensure or Boost

### **When can I return to my normal diet?**

Your health care team will tell you how to change your diet over time and when you can restart your normal diet. Not all people will restart their normal diet at the same time.

After you are able to manage a clear fluid diet, you can start back on your normal diet.

Here are some tips to help you go back to your normal foods.

- 1. Eat smaller portions at meals.** Large portions are often hard to manage after GI surgery.
- 2. Have a snack in between meals.** Snacks can help you meet your nutrition needs during the day.
- 3. Eat slowly and chew your food well.** This will help you digest your food better.
- 4. Drink plenty of fluids each day.** This will help you stay hydrated (when your body has enough water). Each person needs a different amount of fluid.  
Aim to drink 1.5 to 2.5 liters (6 to 10 cups) of fluid per day or \_\_\_\_\_.
- 5. Have protein with each meal and snack.** Protein will help your body heal and help prevent infection. Good sources of protein are:
  - Lean meat, fish and poultry
  - Eggs
  - Tofu, or soy-based drinks
  - Cheese, yogurt and milk
  - Nut butters
  - Legumes (such as chickpeas, lentils and kidney beans)

## What are some side effects I may have after surgery?

After your GI surgery, you may have some of the side effects listed below:

- Reduced desire to eat and weight loss
- Diarrhea (loose or watery poo) and dumping syndrome
- Feeling full
- Vitamin and mineral deficiencies (shortage)
- Pancreatic insufficiency (when your body cannot break down food)
- Malabsorption (when your body cannot use the nutrients from food)

Read more to learn more about each of these side effects and what you can do to help manage them.

### Reduced desire to eat and weight loss

What is this?

- When you do not feel like eating
- When you lose weight without trying

What you may notice about your body:

- You skip or miss meals
- You do not feeling hungry
- You eat less than the amount you often eat

What can you do to help manage this?

- Try to eat 5 to 6 small meals or snacks during the day
- Have high calorie, high protein foods and liquids
- Eat your favourite foods more often
- Try oral nutritional supplements (drinks) like Ensure or Boost that give your body calories and nutrition. You can also make your own smoothies.

## **Diarrhea and dumping syndrome**

What is this?

- Diarrhea is when you have loose or watery stool (poo)
- Dumping syndrome is when food moves out of your stomach too quickly

What you may notice about your body:

- Diarrhea (loose or watery poo)
- Stomach cramps
- Throwing up
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Low blood sugar after meals. This may feel like shaking, flushing, fast heartbeat, hunger, feeling weak or feeling confused.

What can you do to help manage this?

- Try to eat 5 – 6 small meals or snacks during the day
- Drink liquids 30 – 60 minutes before or after meals.
- Have a source of protein (such as tofu, meat, or dairy products) at each meal or snack
- Do not have foods and liquids that have a lot of sugar (such as juice, candy, sodas, honey, jam and jelly).

## Feeling full

What is it?

- When you feel like you just ate even when you did not eat
- It takes a small amount of food to make you feel full

What you may notice about your body:

- You are bloated (your stomach appears swollen or bigger than normal)
- You have stomach discomfort
- You eat less than normal because you feel full

What can you do to help manage it?

- Try to eat 5 – 6 small meals or snacks during the day.
- Choose high calorie, high protein foods and liquids. Do not choose low fat, light or diet products. They do not give you as many calories.
- Try to drink oral nutritional supplements or make your own smoothies.
- It may be easier for your body to break down liquids rather than solids.
- Avoid foods that give you gas (such as legumes, broccoli, cauliflower, onions, garlic or cabbage). These foods can make you feel more full.
- Avoid liquids that give you gas (such as fizzy or bubbly liquids like sodas). Bubbly drinks can make you feel bloated and full.

## **Vitamin and mineral deficiencies**

What is this?

- Vitamins and minerals are parts of food that your body needs to grow and survive.
- A vitamin or mineral deficiency is when your body does not have enough of one or more vitamins or minerals to work well.

What you may notice about your body:

- Anemia (not enough red blood cells to bring oxygen through your body). Signs of anemia can include feeling tired and pale skin.
- Fatigue (feeling very tired)
- Bone disease such as osteoporosis (when your bones become weak)

What can you do to help manage this?

- Ask your family doctor for a blood test. Your doctor can use a blood test to check your level of B12, iron, folate and vitamin D. These are minerals and vitamins that are important for your body to work well.
- Ask your doctor or dietitian about taking other vitamins and minerals

## **Pancreatic insufficiency and malabsorption**

What is this?

- Pancreatic insufficiency is when your body cannot break down food.
- Malabsorption is when your body has problems taking in and using the nutrients from the food you eat.

What you may notice about your body:

- Weight loss
- Too much gas
- Bloating
- Cramping
- Your stool (poo) may be loose, oily or a different colour (lighter, yellow or orange).

What can I do?

- Talk to your oncologist (cancer doctor) or surgeon about using pancreatic enzymes (enzymes help break down fats, proteins and carbohydrates)
- If your health care team tells you to take pancreatic enzymes, you will be given a prescription. Take them with your meals and snacks.

You do not need to eat a low fat diet.

## How can I plan my diet to eat 6 small meals and snacks in a day?

Read below for a sample meal plan. The meal plan gives you one example of how to eat 6 small meals and snacks during the day. The foods and drinks in this meal plan were chosen to help you get enough nutrients.

The right amount of food will be different for each person. Eat an amount that feels right for you and allows you to maintain a healthy weight.

### **Breakfast:**

Toast with peanut butter, small banana, milk

### **Snack:**

Full fat (2% or higher) yogurt with nuts or seeds

### **Lunch:**

Tuna salad on an English muffin, carrot sticks with hummus, orange, milk

### **Snack:**

Rice crackers with cheddar cheese

### **Dinner:**

Pasta with ground chicken in tomato sauce and salad, milk

### **Snack:**

Cottage cheese with apple

**Important:** The meal plan listed is only one example of a meal plan. For patients who need to eat 5 – 6 small meals or snacks during the day, you may plan your diet in other ways that include other foods. Talk to a Registered Dietitian for more information.

## When should I get help from a dietitian?

Ask your doctor to refer you to (book a visit with) a dietitian if you:

- Have questions or concerns about the foods you are eating after surgery
- Are losing weight without trying

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