



Preparing for Cancer Surgery

Information for Patients and Carers

There can be lots to think about when you are planning for your cancer surgery. Some people describe this time as feeling as if they have 'no control'.

But...you can play a huge part in your surgery outcome. You can improve your body's ability to cope with the physical and mental strain of the surgery with as little as two weeks of preparation.

The preparation that you put in now is vital to improving your outcomes later.

Who is this information for?

- Anyone who has surgery planned to treat or remove their cancer
- You may also find this information helpful if you are supporting someone through cancer surgery

Why is it important to prepare for cancer surgery?

The impact that surgery has on your body both physically and mentally is often compared to that of a fitness challenge such as 'running a marathon'.

Looking after your mental health and keeping yourself active and well nourished can help with recovery and may also shorten the amount of time you are in hospital. Other benefits include:

- Improved wound healing
- Lower risk of developing infection
- Improved ability to respond to any infection
- Quicker return to your usual level of fitness

What can I do to prepare myself?

You can prepare your body and mind for your surgery by making practical changes to your;

- Nutrition, hydration and other lifestyle factors
- Activity level
- Psychological wellbeing

Your nutrition and lifestyle choices

Your body needs energy and protein to function effectively. These are often needed in higher amounts when you have cancer and particularly during your recovery from surgery. If you are eating and drinking well before and after your surgery and your body is well nourished it will be able to repair itself more effectively.

How can I improve my nutrition in preparation for surgery?

- Consider your current body weight
- Consider what you eat and drink
- Consider addressing any symptoms or side effects of cancer or treatment that is affecting your ability to eat and drink

Use your height (metres) and weight (kilograms) to calculate your body mass index (BMI) and find out what it means at: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/food-and-nutrition/healthy-eating-and-weight-loss/understanding-your-healthy-weight-body-mass-index-bmi-and-waist-circumference>

“I am a healthy weight”

If you are a healthy body weight, you are managing to eat and drink with no change to your appetite or weight then aim to keep your weight stable and continue to eat and drink as you are able to. You may wish to consider the overall balance of your diet. Visit <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/food-and-nutrition/eating-well/eatwell-guide-how-to-eat-a-healthy-balanced-diet> for more information.

“I am underweight and/or losing weight and/or I have a poor appetite”

Symptoms of cancer or side effects of treatment including loss of appetite, nausea or feeling full can make it difficult to eat and drink well. Over time this can lead to weight loss.

If you are underweight, have lost weight and/or are trying to gain weight or if you have a poor appetite, general healthy eating advice is not appropriate for you. There are other changes you can make to your eating habits that can help you manage your weight and your poor appetite.

In the short-term it can be useful to rely on foods that have a high energy and high protein content. You can fortify your foods to maximise their nutritional content by adding cheese, cream, milk, nut butter or nuts and choose drinks that are high in calories to get the nourishment that you need in a different way.

For practical ideas visit: www.northcancernutrition.scot.

You can also check out our other resources on eating and drinking with symptoms of cancer or side effects of treatment or medications i.e. taste changes, nausea, constipation and many others.

I am overweight with a body mass index above the healthy range and/or gaining weight without needing to

Improving the balance of your diet and making healthier choices can help to improve circulation, blood glucose level control and blood pressure.

Although taking steps to actively lose weight prior to cancer surgery is not encouraged, making healthier food and lifestyle choices will mean you are more likely to get the nutrients that your body needs. This can help with the recovery from your cancer surgery.

You may notice that your weight stays the same or that you gradually lose weight (1kg per week) by making healthier choices. This is the safest way for you to improve your health prior to cancer surgery.

If after your cancer treatment you want support to lose weight, speak to your healthcare professional who will be able to signpost you to someone who can help you.

What about alcohol?

The safe upper limits of alcohol consumption are 14 units per week for men and 14 units per week for women.

If you don't already drink alcohol it is best not to start now.

If you do drink alcohol try to keep within the unit guidelines, spread your consumption of this throughout the week and have at least two alcohol free days each week.

For more information on safe alcohol consumption visit: <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/alcohol-facts/alcoholic-drinks-units/latest-uk-alcohol-unit-guidance>

Count up your units using the unit calculator by downloading the 'mydrinkaware' application.

If you would like help to cut down on your alcohol intake visit: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/alcohol/tips-on-cutting-down>

What about smoking?

Have you thought about cutting down the amount that you smoke or stopping smoking?

The benefits to your health of cutting down or stopping smoking are huge.

Although it is never too late to cut down or stop smoking, the earlier you make changes the more time your body has to recover ahead of your surgery.

Benefits include improvements to your heart and lung function, blood flow which will help healing and a reduced risk of breathing complications. Your taste will also improve and if you have a poor appetite or are not enjoying food this could help you give your body the nourishment that it needs.

Visit <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/stopping-smoking> for more information or for support with changing your smoking habits.

What if I have Diabetes?

Uncontrolled diabetes is a risk factor for surgical complications. If you take steps to improve your diabetes control before your surgery you can reduce your risk of complications and you may also reduce the length of your hospital stay.

If you have type 2 diabetes, making lifestyle changes could improve your diabetes control. Consider changes to your dietary habits or your activity level. Visit diabetes UK for more information: <https://www.diabetes.org.uk>.



If you are prescribed medication for your diabetes or if you are not on any medication but your blood sugar levels are not well controlled you may need to contact your diabetes nurse team to consider changes to your diabetes management.

Your activity level

What are the benefits of being more active?

Any increase in your activity level will have some benefit to your health and your recovery from surgery. Moving around more and increasing your activity level prior to your surgery will help to maximise your heart and lung function and improve blood flow and circulation. This helps the nutrients get to the places in your body it needs to be, to help in the recovery process. Being more active will also offer benefits to your breathing, energy level and mood.

If you are feeling tired, you might find it difficult to consider moving more but increasing your activity level can improve cancer-related fatigue.

Try to keep as physically active as you are able to. Improving your fitness before your surgery can also help you to return to your usual level of fitness more quickly after your surgery.

How can I be more active?

Walking, yoga and even general household chores including hoovering, dusting and planting or gardening all count. Start small and do what you feel able to do. Some ideas to get you started include:

- Take the stairs instead of the lift
- Get off the bus one stop before you had planned and give yourself a longer walk to your destination
- Walk with a friend or whilst listening to music
- Count your steps using a phone app to record your progress and set yourself a goal. Why not try the couch to 5k programme: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/get-running-with-couch-to-5k/>

Visit Macmillan Move More to help you start making changes: <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/preparing-for-treatment/eating-well-and-keeping-active>.

Your psychological wellbeing

A healthy mind is just as important as a healthy body in the run up to your surgery. You may find it challenging to make sense of new information and make changes to your routine so it is important that you are kind to yourself during this time more than ever.

Consider small achievable goals in a step forward to taking care of your mental wellbeing. We know that people who do this notice an improvement in their mood and a reduction in feelings of anger. It can also help you cope better with your surgery and recovery if you feel better.

Relaxation and sleep techniques

- Deep breathing
- Mindfulness
- Meditation
- Yoga or Pilates
- Keep a journal or write a diary entry

Take up a new hobby or learn something new

- Photography
- Drawing
- Painting

Do something you enjoy

- Read a book
- Sing, dance, listen to music or a podcast
- Arts and crafts
- Crossword puzzles or Sudoku
- Knitting
- Adult colouring book or jigsaw
- Card games or dominos
- Game apps on your phone
- Gardening – grow your own vegetables or herbs

Stay Connected

- Connect with old friends or make new friends
- Use technology to keep in touch with those you care about
- Listen to the radio
- Listen to podcasts on a topic that interests you
- Socialise with friends
- Attend a cancer support group, or connect on social media

Who else can support me?

There are many cancer charities and organisations that offer a range of support. Visit our website at <https://www.nhsscotlandnorth.scot/nca/dietary-advice/what-other-organisations-can-help-me> for more information.

There may be support groups, either face to face or online and social media for people who have undergone or who are planned for a specific type of surgery like yours. Some people find this helpful to share experiences. Ask your health professional for more information.