

When the disease progresses

Exercising will become more difficult at some point. Your physiotherapist can advise you how to do your daily activities with less energy. He can also give you and your relatives advice about how to get in or out of bed independently (or with a little help), use the toilet, and take care of yourself for as long as possible.

Preparing healthy food can give a feeling of control during your illness, not only for you, but also for the people around you, who want to take care of you. However, food must not become an obsession. If you have trouble eating, this can create tension for you as well as for the person who prepares the food. You both will feel disappointed when you simply cannot eat, despite all efforts to prepare something nice. However, neither you nor the one who takes care of you is to blame for that. As the disease progresses you naturally will eat and drink less. You cannot do anything to prevent this. There are no food products in this situation that are unhealthy for you and therefore should be avoided. You eat what you feel like eating and you stop eating when you do not want to or cannot eat anymore. Sometimes eating together is stimulating, and sometimes it is not. Talk to each other about this. It is also good to talk about this with your specialist or nurse.

Do you still have questions?

Please contact your counselor.

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weight loss

when cancer
cannot be cured



Information for patients
and relatives

Healthy food and regular exercise are necessary to remain in good condition and have a healthy weight. However, when you feel increasingly ill because of cancer, getting enough exercise becomes problematic.

Introduction

Food often does not taste good anymore, which makes it difficult to get enough nutrition. Your physical fitness and strength decrease: you are easily tired, you feel weak and you can do less. You lose weight without wanting to. In this leaflet you can read about what causes this condition. Additionally, tips are given on how to deal with this problem.

Causes of unintentional weight loss and decreasing physical fitness

When you have cancer, it can be difficult to eat healthy and sufficient food. The tumor can be in the way, for example if it is in your mouth, stomach or bowels. Treatments like surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy can have side effects like nausea, sensitive mouth and throat, loss of taste, diarrhea or constipation. It therefore is no wonder that you feel less inclined to eat. However, there is more to it. Unintentional weight loss with cancer is not only caused by eating less food, but also because of the cancer itself. Cancer disrupts processes in your body. This leads to loss of fat tissue as well as muscle tissue. Furthermore, the nutrition you take in is less well utilized. Your strength, physical fitness and weight deteriorate, you tire more easily, and you can get exhausted. Moreover, you lose your appetite, food tastes different than you are used to, and you cannot eat as much as before anymore. You can even develop a dislike of food. When the cancer cannot be cured, this process will continue and you can lose more and more weight and feel less fit. This phenomenon is called 'cachexia' (pronounce: kakeksia). To fight this

loss of weight, muscles and physical fitness it is important to pay attention to your nutrition. Additionally, exercise is important. You can eat perfectly healthy, but if you do not exercise the food is not used optimally for building muscles. At the same time you cannot exercise and build muscles without necessary nutrition.

About nutrition

Variation is an important element of healthy food. Even in your situation it is important to eat a daily, preferably with every meal, portion of meat, chicken, cheese, egg, or vegetarian meat substitute. The use of dairy products with your meal or in between is recommended, like (chocolate) milk, buttermilk, yogurt, pudding, cottage cheese, or porridge. A portion of vegetables and a few pieces of fruit are also needed daily. Bread, potatoes, rice or pasta can be eaten as one wishes. To make sure that you digest enough fat you use butter, margarine, or oil with your meals. These nutritional products together will provide for a good basis, which you can complete using products you like. Variety is the spice of life and variation will make sure you eat all the necessary things. It is not necessary to eat organic products. However, if you prefer organic products that is perfectly fine.

If you notice that you have lost more than 2-3 kilograms of weight and you are not able to eat more, it is advisable to discuss this with your doctor or nurse. They can put you in contact with a dietician who is familiar with the treatment of cancer. You can also make an appointment yourself. To fight the weight- and muscle loss a personal dietary advice, adapted to your symptoms and options, is needed. The dietician determines which nutrients you lack and advises you on how to replete this. A change of nutrients can help with lack of appetite and gastrointestinal complaints. Often small snacks with lots of protein and energy are helpful. Sometimes supplements or special nutritional drinks rich in protein and energy are needed to get sufficient nutrition. Together with the dietician you will decide what the right option is.

People in your surroundings also can give suggestions and advice. There are many books about nutrition and cancer and the Internet also is a source of information. This is nice, because you can use a helping hand. However, the problem with this kind of information is that it is difficult to tell what is true, partially true, or not true. There are many products that are thought to have a positive effect on cancer, but do not. There are also many products that are thought to be carcinogenic, but are not. This might be confusing for you. The often heard advice to use extra nutritional supplements like vitamins is not without risk. Always consult with your doctor or dietician when you consider using extra nutritional supplements. They can tell you if your solution is useful in your situation.

About exercise

You can only keep your muscles in shape when you exercise enough. Daily routines like walking (up stairs), opening a bottle or can, squat, or getting up from a chair become more difficult if you lose strength by decreasing muscle volume and a low level of exercise. In case of severe fatigue you are advised to rest. By resting alone the problem will get worse. You don't have to run a marathon to build up or maintain muscle volume. A daily walk or bike ride is enough to maintain muscle volume. Little chores in and around the house are also useful activities. In the beginning this will take a lot of effort, but it will get easier if you do this regularly. Your specialist or nurse can put you in contact with a physiotherapist who is specialized in exercise and cancer. Together with the physiotherapist you can create a work-out schedule, which will be adapted to your capabilities, without exhausting you. The work-out will focus on muscle growth, through weight lifting for example, as well as on improvement of your physical fitness, through walking or riding a bike. Your fatigue complaints could diminish because of the exercises. The physiotherapist also can advise you on how to use your daily activities for maintaining your fitness and strength.