

# Tube Feeding and Head and Neck Cancer









When your body does not get the right balance of energy and nutrients that it needs, you may become malnourished. **Malnutrition** is, in this case, considered undernutrition. Malnutrition **threatens your health and your ability to fight sickness and injuries**. This fact sheet will help explain more about your potential malnutrition and possible need for tube feeding.

## Did You Know?

- Cancer patients are at a higher risk of malnutrition. In fact, the rate of malnutrition among cancer patients is reported up to 80%.<sup>1</sup>
- Malnutrition is most common among patients with gastrointestinal tract, head and neck, and liver and lung cancers.
- It is more common among those of older age and those with more advanced stages of cancer.
- The disease and the treatments for head and neck cancer may contribute to many symptoms and conditions that prevent patients from getting adequate nutrition.

## Know the Warning Signs

Malnutrition is not always easy to see, so it is important to keep an eye out for possible signs that you may be malnourished.<sup>2</sup> The major signs of malnutrition include:

 <p>Sudden unexpected weight loss</p>	 <p>Loss of appetite</p>
 <p>Slow-healing wounds</p>	 <p>Feeling tired or fatigued</p>
 <p>Muscle weakness</p>	 <p>Frequent nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea</p>
 <p>Swelling in your ankles, legs, or belly</p>	 <p>Getting sick often</p>

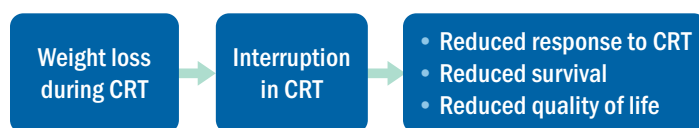
## Why It Matters

Malnutrition is a serious issue that can have dangerous consequences on your well-being. The effects of malnutrition in cancer patients include:

- Loss of weight and muscle
- Higher death risk
- Longer and more frequent hospital stays
- Higher risk of infections
- Higher risk of bad side effects to cancer treatment
- Higher stress levels
- Higher healthcare costs
- Less independence
- Higher risk of bone fractures

## My Healthcare Team is Recommending a Feeding Tube. Why?

Sometimes, despite your best efforts to eat, patients like you lose weight during chemotherapy or radiation treatments (CRT) or develop other symptoms that prevent you from eating enough. This can sometimes lead to an interruption in CRT. A feeding tube and intake of feeding formula can aid in weight loss prevention during and after CRT. This tube feeding treatment is also called enteral nutrition.



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## Questions About Tube Feeding

### Is the feeding tube permanent?

The feeding tube can just be temporary and may be removed after you no longer need it.

### Can I eat by mouth if I have a feeding tube?

If your doctor gives you the OK to swallow and eat, then you can eat by mouth with a feeding tube. The feeding tube is a way to supplement oral eating in order to maintain or gain weight.<sup>3</sup>

### Can I put food in my feeding tube?

Yes, a blenderized whole food meal is an option for you to use in feeding tubes. Please discuss with your clinician to see if this is for you.

### Will I ever be able to eat by mouth again?

Most patients with head and neck cancer should be able to go back to eating by mouth. You will need to discuss with your doctor.

### What kind of tube feeding formulas are available?

There are many types of tube feeding formulas available — standard commercial formulas, blenderized formulas, and more disease-specific formulas. Your healthcare team, particularly your dietitian, will make suggestions on the appropriate formula for you.

### What is blenderized tube feeding formula and why do people choose it?

Blenderized tube feedings (BTFs) are blends of whole food ingredients with a consistency that can be administered through a feeding tube. BTFs can be used for partial, supplemental, or complete enteral nutrition support (EN). Homemade BTFs are made from whole foods prepared in a blender using a meal plan or recipe. There are also commercially available BTF products.<sup>4</sup> It is important to work with your dietitian to determine if BTF is right for you.

### What are the potential benefits of BTF?

Improved weight gain, reduced nausea/vomiting, better bowel regularity, increased oral intake, decreased reflux, decreased gas/bloating<sup>5,6</sup>

### Should I add dietary supplements to my tube feeding during treatment?

Vitamin/mineral supplements may help fill gaps in nutrient intake. Herbal supplements may change how the cancer drugs are absorbed, distributed in the body, and excreted, causing effects that are not expected.<sup>7</sup> Excessive vitamin/mineral supplementation may cause complications.<sup>8</sup> When dietary supplements, herbs, or other forms of Complimentary Alternative Medicine are taken with an anticancer drug, there is a risk they will change the way the cancer drug works.<sup>7</sup> If you are taking a vitamin supplement, it should not exceed 100% of Dietary Reference Intakes. Ask your dietitian about selecting safe and appropriate dietary supplements.

## Key Takeaways

- Malnutrition can occur frequently in patients with head and neck cancer.
- Preventing malnutrition is key to preventing interruptions in treatment.
- Feeding tubes can be temporary and may help prevent weight loss.
- Typically, patients can still eat by mouth even when they have a feeding tube.
- There are many options of feeding formulas, and BTF is an important one to consider.
- You should work with your dietitian to create a tube feeding plan.

## Patient Resources

**National Cancer Institute.** Head and Neck Cancer–Patient Version. [cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck](https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck)

**Oley Foundation.** Tube Feeding Tips-Formula. [oley.org/page/TFTips\\_LandingPage](https://www.oley.org/page/TFTips_LandingPage)

## References

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