10 important nutrition tips for before, during and after a hospital stay

When you have a hospital stay coming up, eating is often the last thing on your mind. But it should be one of the first. Good nutrition is vital to:

- Make your body stronger to get it ready for what’s to come
- Help your body during the surgery and treatment
- Help your healing and recovery afterwards

People who eat well before, during and after their hospital care tend to do much better and sometimes can get out of the hospital sooner. If you aren’t able to eat well in the hospital, it’s important to pay extra attention to eating – even if you don’t feel like it – after you get home.

Here are 10 important tips to boost your nutrition and healing during hospital care:

1. **Get weighed.**
   Make sure your weight is checked in the hospital when you are admitted and every few days during your stay. Your weight affects important decisions, such as how much medication or anesthesia you should have. If your weight has changed recently, be sure to tell your doctor and nurse. Bring your weight record.

2. **Get screened for nutrition risk.**
   A “nutrition-risk screening” is a series of questions that helps identify any eating issues – such as weight loss or poor appetite – that could affect your health. All hospitals have these standard screenings. If no one at the hospital asks you about your nutrition, request a nutrition-risk screening from your nurse. If you have had trouble eating or drinking in the last week or more, don’t wait for someone to ask you about it – speak up and ask the nurse to tell your doctor.

3. **Understand your diet.**
   Doctors and dietitians prescribe diets based on your specific health needs and science. If you don’t understand the diet and eating instructions, ask to have instructions explained again until they are clear to you.

   If you normally follow a different diet at home – especially if another doctor has prescribed it for you – tell your hospital care team about it. In some situations, popular diets, such as low carb, paleo, ketogenic or gluten-free diets, are unsafe for people who are sick or recovering from surgery. Your hospital team can advise you about what is safe for you.

4. **Eat from all the food groups.**
   When ordering meals in the hospital, choose foods from all of the food groups – protein, vegetables, fruits, grains and cereals, and dairy products – to make sure that you get the right balance of nutrition to heal and recover. It’s especially important to eat some protein – such as lean meat, fish, yogurt, milk, eggs, tofu, nuts, seeds, legumes or beans – at every meal. In general, choose foods that you enjoy to keep up your appetite.
5. Know when you can eat.
Mealtimes in hospitals are sometimes interrupted for tests and procedures. Ask your health team to arrange your day so that you don’t miss meals, and if a meal does get interrupted, don’t be shy about asking for food or another meal. If your meals have been stopped for medical reasons, ask when you can eat again and make sure you don’t go past that time.

6. Don’t try to lose weight unless your doctor recommends it.
Never try to lose weight before or after surgery, chemotherapy, radiation or other major treatments unless your doctor has advised you to and explained how to do it safely. Cutting back too much on calories can affect how your body recovers. Some underweight people may even be advised to gain weight before treatment. If you are trying to lose weight, ask your doctor or dietitian when you should stop dieting before treatment and when it’s safe to restart dieting afterward.

7. If you have trouble eating, ask for help.
If you are having a hard time eating for more than a few days after going home from the hospital, or you don’t feel like eating for more than a week, tell your doctor or nurse and see what they think. They may give you some advice and want to keep in touch about it, or refer you to a registered dietitian.

8. If eating makes you cough or choke, tell someone.
Some treatments and diseases cause changes in how you chew or swallow. If this happens, it may no longer be safe for you to eat foods with certain textures. If you find that you are coughing or choking while eating or drinking, tell your doctor, nurse, dietitian or speech therapist right away.

9. Know how much water you should be drinking.
In most cases, drinking adequate water is important for recovery, but in some cases, limiting fluids is important for medical reasons. Ask your doctor how much you should drink, or how much you should limit drinking liquids during and after your hospital stay.

10. If you have any concerns, please ask.
Please ask for help before you leave the hospital if you have any concerns – for example:
• If you don’t understand your diet instructions for home.
• If you are struggling to maintain your weight or feel like you can’t eat enough.
• If you don’t have access to enough food, need help preparing food or need temporary meal support from Meals on Wheels.
• If you have any other concerns about eating.

Most hospitals have outpatient nutrition services to teach you how to eat with your medical condition, and social services programs to connect you with sources for food and help. Don’t be shy! Eating well will help you recover and manage better and gain strength back.

To learn more about how to eat to help your body before, during and after a hospital stay, talk to your doctor, or ask for a referral to a registered dietitian if you need more help.

Providence Oregon Outpatient Nutrition Services
Providence.org/nutrition

This information is for general educational purposes only – always follow your doctor’s recommendations, and check with your doctor or registered dietitian if you have any questions.