Poor Appetite

Changes in appetite can be caused by being sick, pills and medicine, being upset, or just by getting older. If you don’t feel like eating as much as usual, or if you are a caregiver for someone whose appetite seems lower than normal, it’s important to talk to a dietitian or doctor about it.

People sometimes think that if they’re not hungry, it means they don’t need to eat – but that’s only true for very short periods of time. When you eat too little for weeks or more because of a poor appetite, it can cause health problems. That’s because food isn’t just fuel to keep you moving – it’s important for keeping every part of your body and brain healthy and working right.

**Adults and seniors need to eat enough, even if they’re not hungry, to:**

- Feel better, in body and mind
- Get around better and not falling
- Heal better and do better during surgery
- Avoid losing too much weight and muscle, which can slow down healing

See page 2 for tips on how to eat more when you have a poor appetite.

**When to ask for help**

Malnutrition can come on quickly. If poor appetite is an issue, it’s important to keep an eye out for weight changes and to ask for help from a doctor:

- If poor appetite continues longer than a few weeks.
- If you are losing weight for a few weeks.

One exception: in the very last stages of life, appetite loss is natural, and encouraging a person to eat may cause more discomfort than help. The suggestions offered here are to help before that stage, when eating more can help improve health and make life better.

**If you think that you or someone you care for might not be eating enough, a registered dietitian can help you:**

- Understand how much is the right amount to eat
- Offer ideas about how to stimulate your appetite
- Help you discover foods that fit your health needs, tastes and preferences

Please don’t wait for serious weight loss or health issues to occur. Talk to your health care provider if you have any concerns, or make an appointment with a registered dietitian.
How to eat better with a poor appetite

- Try eating smaller meals more often. Eating three small meals and three snacks may be easier than eating three big meals a day.
- Eat more on days and times when you feel the most hungry.
- Drink liquids with calories, such as milk, juice, smoothies, protein shakes and medical nutrition drinks. Drink nutritious beverages between meals, rather than with meals, to avoid getting full on liquids when it’s time to eat.
- Keep easy, high-calorie snacks on hand, such as peanut butter crackers, pretzels, cheese, dried fruits, nuts, full-fat yogurt, pudding and granola bars.
- Stock up on favorite foods and foods that are the easiest to eat and make.
- Don’t wait until you feel hungry to eat. Try to eat on a schedule, even if you’re not very hungry. For frail adults or seniors going through medical treatment, food is an important part of treatment.
- Add a little protein wherever you can to help rebuild tissues and boost calories to increase energy. If toast is your normal breakfast, try adding some peanut butter or almond butter and jam.
- Eat with others and make meal times nice, relaxing and social.
- When appetite loss is not helping eating, any calorie is a good calorie. Don’t worry too much about nutritional guidelines for the short term, and get extra calories wherever you can, even if it’s from soda, desserts or high-fat foods. (Talk to your doctor or dietitian first if you have diabetes)

A registered dietitian can help you learn more about how much you should eat and how to eat better when you don’t have much appetite.

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.