



Taking care of yourself following a gastrointestinal cancer diagnosis

Gastrointestinal cancers include cancers found in the:

- Gallbladder and bile ducts
- Oesophagus
- Stomach (gastric)
- Liver
- Pancreas
- Small intestine
- Colon or rectum (colorectal or bowel)
- Anus (anal cancer)

This booklet has been developed and funded by AstraZeneca and is intended for patients diagnosed with gastrointestinal cancers.

Developed in collaboration with AMMF – The Cholangiocarcinoma Charity and Natalie Barratt, Clinical Nurse Specialist at the Christie NHS Foundation Trust.

Reporting of side effects: If you get any side effects, talk to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. This includes any possible side effects not listed in the package leaflet. You can also report side effects directly via the Yellow Card Scheme at www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard. By reporting side effects, you can help provide more information on the safety of medicines.

The importance of taking care of yourself

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming and may make it difficult to stay motivated and take care of yourself.¹ Taking small steps to care for your wellbeing before, during, and after treatment can help you to improve your mental health.²

In this booklet, we will look at some helpful ways you can take care of yourself through:



Movement:

Gentle movement can help to boost energy, strength, and mental health.³

Pages 3-5



Diet and nutrition:

A balanced diet fuels your body and helps to keep your strength up. Small, frequent meals and drinking more liquids can ease some side effects and support digestion.⁴ Reducing or quitting drinking alcohol and smoking can also support your wellbeing.^{5,6}

Pages 6-10



Mental wellbeing:

Calming techniques can ease stress and boost your mental health. Creative outlets, self-care, and connecting with others can also help support your emotional wellbeing.^{7,8}

Pages 11-14



Tracking and reflection:

Use these pages to help you keep track of your exercise and food, and check in with how you feel each day.

Pages 15-19

Movement

How can staying active help during cancer treatment?



Everyone has their own fitness level.⁹ If you don't do much exercise, this is a great time to start moving a little more each day.¹⁰

The benefits of staying active can include:



Preparing for treatment

You might only have a few weeks between finding out that you have cancer and starting treatment. Even during this time, **small efforts to stay active can help.**¹¹



Helping your body respond well

Staying active can help you cope with treatment.¹⁰ You may have fewer side effects, like feeling tired, and enjoy a better quality of life during and after cancer treatment.^{12,13} Being active can also help you stay fit, **improve your mood**, and help you **stay on track with your treatment.**¹³



Feeling more in control

Regular movement can help you **feel more in control and mentally prepared for treatment.**¹¹



Always ask your medical team what type and level of activity is right for you during your treatment.

What should I ask my healthcare team about my physical health?



You may have already talked about fitness with your medical team. It is important to know:

- **Why** it matters
- **What** you can do to take care of yourself
- **How** your physical health can affect your treatment

You can ask your medical team questions like:

- What type of physical activities can I do?
- Are there any types of physical activities I should avoid?
- How can I fit exercise into my day during surgery or treatment?
- I enjoy doing [activity]. Is it okay for me to keep doing this?

Words about exercise and fitness that you might hear:

- **ECOG (Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group) performance score:** A scale from 0 to 5 that helps doctors see how well you can do everyday tasks. A low number means you can do more on your own.¹⁴
- **Exercise adaptation:** Changes to physical activity to make it safe and easy to manage, based on your personal health.
- **Fatigue:** Extreme tiredness that does not improve with rest. This can be common during cancer treatment.
- **Prehabilitation (or prehab):** A programme to build strength, movement, or overall wellbeing before treatment.
- **Rehabilitation (or rehab):** A programme to help regain strength, movement, or overall wellbeing after treatment.

You might also find AMMF's booklet, *'questions to ask your doctor'* helpful. It has example questions to ask so you can better understand your diagnosis and treatment plan.

Scan or click to download the booklet:



What does being active look like?

Keeping active can help you stay strong, feel less tired, and feel better overall.^{10,12,13}

Being active means different things to different people.^{9,12} It is important to think about your fitness level and choose activities to fit your needs and energy.

Building exercise into daily activities

Aim to do around 30 minutes of activity five days a week if you can.⁹ This can include walking the dog, playing with kids, gardening, or even walking to the shops.

You don't need to go to a gym or go running. There are lots of ways that you can build these into your daily life:

Aerobic/cardio exercises



Each step counts as you get fit



Exercise does not need to be done alone

Strength exercises



Combine your activities with time outdoors



Find your fitness in the moments you enjoy

Understanding your body during activities

It is important to know that **people with cancer can often feel out of breath. It can be a symptom of cancer, or side effect of treatment.**¹⁵ Do not worry if this happens. Breathing slightly harder during activities can help you build your fitness back up.

Exercise routines

You can find detailed exercise programmes tailored for different fitness levels on Prehab4Cancer. **Scan or click the QR code below to access Prehab4Cancer.**



Always speak to your medical team before you start any new exercises.⁹ In some places, your medical team may arrange help from a personal trainer or give you access to a local gym as part of your treatment plan.



Diet and nutrition

Why is a balanced diet important?

A balanced diet can help to keep your muscles and immune system strong and give you energy. This can help your body to cope better with treatment.¹⁶



Find a balanced diet that works for you. Some people may need to try to keep their weight the same, while others may need to lose some weight. **Your medical team or dietician can give you advice on what is right for you.**

Talk about diet and nutrition with your medical team or dietician. You may want to ask:

- What can I eat to help with tiredness or weight changes?
- Do you have any tips for managing taste changes or feeling sick?
- How can I change my meals if I big portions are hard to eat?

Words about diet you may hear:

Antioxidants	Nutrients which help protect your body's cells from damage.
Electrolytes	Minerals which help your body to stay hydrated and help your muscles and nerves work.
Malnutrition	When your body is not getting enough nutrients to stay strong and healthy. This can happen if treatment affects your appetite or digestion.
Nutrient-dense	Foods that are rich in vitamins, minerals, and energy (like nuts, seeds, or avocados). These are helpful if your appetite is low.
Portion size	How much food you eat at one time. Your medical team may suggest eating smaller meals more often if your appetite is low.
Soft diet	Foods that are easier to chew and swallow, like soups and yoghurt.
Pancreatic exocrine insufficiency (PEI)	When the pancreas does not make enough digestive enzymes to break down food properly. This can cause problems such as bloating, wind, stomach pain, or poo that is oily, pale or floating/difficult to flush. ¹⁷
Bile acid malabsorption (BAM)	When bile acids, which normally help digest fat, are not absorbed properly in the gut. This can cause diarrhoea and stomach discomfort. ¹⁸
Small intestine bacterial overgrowth (SIBO)	When too many bacteria grow in the small intestine, which can lead to bloating, wind, pain, and changes in poo. ¹⁹
Dietitian	A health professional who helps you choose the right foods to keep you healthy.

How can I eat well during treatment?

Diet and nutrition can often feel confusing. That is why it is useful to have some simple steps to follow before, during and after cancer treatment.

You may not always feel like eating three big meals a day. Try eating smaller meals more often instead. You can also have healthy snacks between meals.⁴



Here are some tips to help you plan your meals and diet:

- Think about taking a short walk before a meal, or just a few breaths of fresh air. Some people find this helps to give them more of an appetite.⁴
- Keep meals simple and let other people help you with the cooking and shopping.⁴
- If a full plate feels too much, eat small amounts more often. Eating little and often, with healthy drinks and snacks, can help.⁴
- Relax and try to enjoy what you eat. Take your time and chew your food well.⁴

Some people with pancreatic cancer may also need to take pancreatic enzyme medicine, like Creon, with meals, snacks and milky drinks. If you need this, your healthcare team or dietician should give you advice to make sure you are eating the right foods.²⁰



If you go to hospital for your treatment, try not to miss any meals. Bring snacks and drinks that you enjoy with you. If your doctor has prescribed you nutritional supplement drinks, bring them in a bottle or carton.⁴



After surgery (resection) for liver (hepatobiliary) cancer, some people find it harder to digest fatty foods or dairy. You might notice stomach pain, gas, bloating or diarrhoea after eating these foods.²¹ If this happens, tell your healthcare team or dietician. They can give you advice to help you choose foods that make you feel better.



Keep enjoying food when you can. If you need support with nutrition or meal planning, talk to your medical team. They can help guide you or point you to helpful resources and support.

How can my diet help with treatment side effects?

You may find that your appetite changes during treatment, and this is very common.⁴ Some side effects could include:^{22,23}

- **Diarrhoea:** Runny or loose poo
- **Constipation:** Finding it hard to poo
- **Loss of appetite:** Eating less than normal
- **Nausea or vomiting:** Feeling like you might be sick, or being sick
- **Taste changes:** Things may taste different or have no taste
- **Hyperglycaemia:** Where the level of sugar in your blood is too high
- **Colitis and gastrointestinal (GI) disorders:** Colitis means the inside of your bowel gets sore or swollen. This can cause pain, diarrhoea, or bleeding. Other stomach or bowel problems can also happen during treatment.



Always speak with your medical team if you have any side effects.

Tips to help manage some of the more common side effects include:



Eat 'little and often'

Eating small meals often can help keep your energy up and give your body the nutrients it needs.⁴ It can also be easier on your stomach.

- Eating regularly can help to keep your energy levels stable and stop unwanted weight loss due to loss of appetite.
- Smaller portions are easier to digest. This can help with bloating, stomach pain, or other stomach problems.



Choose easily digestible foods

Eating easily digestible foods can help you to get nutrients while managing potential side effects.²⁴

- For nausea, vomiting, or discomfort, try to eat bland foods. Examples include plain rice, bananas, toast, and boiled potatoes.
- Avoid spicy, greasy, or very rich foods that may trigger symptoms
- Include low-fibre, soft foods if you are experiencing colitis or digestive issues. Examples include mashed potatoes, applesauce, or yoghurt.



Talk to your medical team or dietician

Your medical team can advise you on food choices, portion sizes, and hydration. You should also ask if there is a dietician available to help provide additional information and support.

- If you have hyperglycaemia (high blood sugar), choosing your food and drinks carefully can help manage your condition. This can help to keep your blood sugar steady.

How can I stay hydrated during cancer treatment?

Cancer treatments like chemotherapy or immunotherapy can make you dehydrated. This means your body does not have enough water.²⁵ Side effects like feeling sick, being sick or not feeling hungry can also make this worse.

Staying hydrated can help:²⁵⁻²⁷

- Keep your **skin healthy** and **reduce dryness**
- Manage symptoms like **feeling sick** and support your appetite
- Avoid **constipation**, which can be a common side effect of treatment
- **Feel less tired** and can help you feel more energetic
- Support **concentration and mental clarity**, reducing feelings of dizziness or confusion
- Keep your **kidneys working well** by flushing out toxins from treatment

Try to drink at least 1.5-2 litres of water each day (about 6-8 cups of fluid).²⁹ If your medical team give you different advice, follow what they say. Using a cup or bottle with lines can help keep track of how much you have drink.

If you are struggling to drink large amounts, try sipping small amounts regularly throughout the day.



Hydration is not just about drinking water. You can try herbal teas, diluted juices, milk, soups, broths, or oral rehydration solutions (if recommended by your medical team).²⁸



How can stopping smoking or vaping improve my health?

If you smoke or vape, stopping can help your body in many ways.^{5,29}

Quitting can help your blood flow better and help your body get more oxygen. It can also help your stomach and gut work better. These are all helpful for your treatment journey.^{5,29,30}

Quitting smoking or vaping is not easy, but you can get help. You don't have to do it alone. Support services can give you practical advice that can help you to stop smoking. Search online for support services near you. You can also ask your medical team for support.

How can drinking less alcohol improve my health?

Drinking less alcohol can help your liver work better and give you more energy.^{31,32} These positive changes can make a difference during your treatment journey.

Cutting back on alcohol can be hard, but you don't have to do it alone. You can get support to help you make changes at your own pace.³¹ You can also ask your medical team about services that can help you reduce alcohol.



If you have liver cancer, it is best to stop drinking alcohol completely to help your liver recover. It does not matter what caused the damage. If you usually drink a lot of alcohol, stopping all at once may be hard or unsafe. Your healthcare team may suggest cutting down slowly instead. Talk to your doctor or local alcohol services. They can support you and help you make a safe plan to drink less.³³



Mental wellbeing

How can cancer affect my feelings?

Finding out you have cancer can bring up all kinds of feelings.³⁴

It is normal to feel upset or worried. Your feelings may also change throughout your treatment. Remember, **there is no 'right' way to feel, and every person's experience is different.**³⁴

It is important to be aware that how your body feels can also affect your mood:³⁴



Changes in appetite

Struggling to eat well can leave you feeling low or worried



Fatigue

Feeling very tired can affect your mood and lead to feelings of stress, anxiety, or low mood



Loss of interest in sex

Changes to your body can affect your confidence and how you feel about closeness. This is completely normal



Pain

Ongoing pain can make you feel more stressed or upset



Panic attacks

A fast heartbeat or feeling short of breath can make you feel panicked



Sleep problems

Not getting enough rest can make it harder to deal with your feelings

How can I find support that's right for me?

Talking about your journey

Talking to your family, friends, nurses, or someone who has been through cancer can help. **Sharing how you feel can make things a little less daunting.**

Talking does not mean you have to be positive all the time. You just need to be honest and let people support you in the way you need.



Accessing cancer support groups

A cancer support group can connect you with other people who know what you are going through. These groups give you a safe space to talk about what you're going through, ask questions, and feel less alone.

You can choose the type of group that works best for you:

- **In-person groups:** These meet at hospitals, community centres, or local cancer charities. They offer welcoming spaces across the UK for drop-in cancer support for patients and families.
- **Online groups:** These include forums, social media groups or virtual meetings. They're great if you find travel hard or just want to join from home.
- **Condition-specific groups:** Some groups focus on specific cancers. You can talk to experts and others who face similar challenges. For biliary tract cancer support, such as cholangiocarcinoma, AMMF – The Cholangiocarcinoma Charity is the UK's only charity with this specific focus.



Ask your healthcare team about Macmillan nurses or local open days. These events can help you find extra support from nurses or specialist teams closer to home.



How can I look after my mental health?

Your mental health is an important part of your overall wellbeing.

Finding the right support networks is key for sharing your challenges. You can also take small steps on your own to help your mental health during your cancer journey.

There are many ways to help you manage stress and anxiety. Some things that might help include:



Mindfulness and meditation

Mindfulness means focusing on what's happening right now. It includes noticing your breathing, your surroundings, and your thoughts without judgment. It can be a helpful way to manage anxious feelings and improve focus.⁷

You could try:

- **Calm breathing:** Breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4, breathe out for 4, and repeat.⁸
- **Guided meditation apps:** Apps like Headspace, Calm, and MyLife Meditation offer free content to help you get started.
- **Mindful moments:** Simply notice the feel of warm water when you wash your hands or take a moment to savour your morning tea or coffee.⁷



Gentle movement for the mind and body

Gentle movement like yoga or stretching can ease tension and help you sleep better. It can also improve your mood. Many cancer charities also offer tailored sessions for people during or after treatment.

You could explore:

- **Maggie's Centres:** Many places offer free wellbeing classes. These include yoga and other ways to relax, both in person and online.
- **The Cancer Exercise app (created by Macmillan Cancer Support):** Offers safe, gentle exercise routines designed for people with cancer.



Improving your sleep

Good sleep helps your body heal and can make it easier to cope each day. Cancer treatment, discomfort, or worry can make sleep harder, but small changes might help.³⁶

You could try:³⁵

- **Creating a routine:** Aim for the same bedtime and wake-up time each day.
- **Winding down:** Do something calming before bed, like reading or listening to calming audio. Avoid screens and bright lights an hour before sleep.
- **Using sleep support apps:** Apps like Pzizz, Calm, and the NHS Sleep App can help you relax. They offer sleep sounds, and simple calming activities.
- **Trying mind dumping:** If busy thoughts keep you awake, try writing them down in a notebook. This can help clear your mind and make it easier to rest.

How can I track my progress?

When preparing for cancer treatment, set realistic goals. This can help you feel more in control. Remember to work within your own limits and focus on what feels right for you.

Before treatment

If you have some time before treatment begins, you might set goals to help your mind and body feel stronger. **This is called prehabilitation.**¹¹

You might aim to:

- Move your body a little more each day
- Eat a balanced meal at least once a day to boost your energy
- Try a calming technique to manage stress

During treatment

Your goals may need to change once treatment begins – and that’s okay. Some days you may feel more able to be more active, eat well, or practice mindfulness. On other days, simply resting might be the best thing for your body. **It is all about balance.**

Make sure to:

- Listen to your body and adjust your goals as needed
- Celebrate the small wins, like getting outside for fresh air
- Ask for support – you don’t have to do this alone

Check in and adjust

Check in with your medical team often to see what’s working and where you might need to adapt. They can offer advice to help you stay on track in a way that fits your needs.

Tip: You could keep a simple wellbeing diary to track how you are feeling and any progress you notice.



Capturing your thoughts

Use this space to keep a track of your exercise, nutrition and how you are feeling. You can fill this in on your own or use it to help you talk with friends, family or support groups.

You can write down questions that you think of. You can also write down tips that help you cope, or any feelings you want to share. Bring these notes to your next appointment. Talking them through with your healthcare team can help you understand your treatment and get the support you need.

Date		
Physical health (activity and symptoms) <i>Write down any activity you did (like walking or stretching). Note how your body felt. You can also record any new symptoms, such as pain, tiredness, or changes in your energy.</i>		
Diet (meals, snacks and hydration) <i>List what you ate and drank today. Note if you felt sick, didn't feel hungry, or found eating hard. Write down what helped.</i>		
Mental Health (mood and emotions) <i>Write how you felt (for example, worried, hopeful, calm, or low). Note anything you did to help your mood, like deep breathing or talking with someone.</i>		
Questions or concerns for medical team <i>Write down any questions you want to ask. You might want to ask about symptoms, treatment, side effects, or emotional support.</i>		

Date			
 Physical health (activity and symptoms)			
 Diet (meals, snacks and hydration)			
 Mental Health (mood and emotions)			
 Questions or concerns for medical team			

Date			
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Notes

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If you would like to share any feedback on the content of this booklet, please answer our short feedback survey by scanning or clicking the QR code:



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