

My Top Tips for Eating Well During and After Head and Neck Radiotherapy

By Meredy Birdi, [The Cancer Dietitian](#)



If you're getting ready to start radiotherapy for head and neck cancer, there are some practical things you can do to help yourself feel stronger and more supported through the weeks ahead.

Every person's experience is different, but there are some common themes, especially when it comes to keeping up your strength, nourishing your body, and supporting healing and recovery. Over the years, I've seen how a few small steps can make a really big difference to how people cope day to day, and how they feel afterwards.

So here are some of my best, tried and tested tips for getting ready, getting through, and rebuilding after radiotherapy.

Preparing for Radiotherapy

You might hear the term prehab which simply means preparing yourself for treatment. As one of my lovely patients once said, it's about "getting match fit."

In head and neck cancer care, this idea isn't new. Teams have been helping people prepare for many years, whether that's called pre-assessment, prehab, or something else. It's a time to get yourself ready physically, practically, and emotionally - a window of opportunity to strengthen your nutrition, fitness, and wellbeing before treatment begins.

Some people will have a feeding tube placed as part of their plan. Everyone will be given individual guidance and support based on their own needs. For everyone, there's real value in focusing on nourishing yourself before treatment starts, being pre-emptive, and thinking ahead based on what you've been told to expect.

Start gathering ideas for foods that might be easier to manage as you move into treatment and use this time to stock up your cupboards and freezer so you've got easy, nourishing options to hand later when you might be tired.

Think about softer, smoother meals with sauces or gravies, and typically lean away from anything dry or rough like crackers or muesli.

A few ideas to get you started:

- Batch cook or buy freezer meals such as fish pie, cottage pie, Bolognese, casseroles, or soups
- Pantry staples like tinned fish, rice pudding, custard, cereal, and tinned fruit
- Fridge favourites including eggs, milk of choice or fortified alternatives, yoghurt, and cheese

Eggs are such a good all-rounder. I often describe them as nature's superfood! Soft, easy to prepare, rich in protein, and a great canvas for adding whatever you fancy. Cereal with milk, warm or cold, can make a quick, comforting meal at any time of day.

This preparation stage isn't just about food. Prehab is about the whole person - food, movement, sleep, and mindset all play a part. It's about bolstering yourself and starting to build in nourishing habits that will help you feel more resilient through treatment.

Getting Through Radiotherapy**Stay proactive**

In my experience, if there's one thing that really makes a difference during radiotherapy, it's being proactive. The more you can stay ahead of things, the better you'll get on, whether it's your mouth care, pain, swallowing, bowels, sleep, or anything else. Keeping on top of your symptoms is so important.

Over the years, I've seen that when people manage their symptoms early, they eat better, drink better, sleep better, and feel so much better overall.

It's completely understandable to want to avoid taking medication unless you really must, but what I've learned is that this is the time to think differently. Good symptom control is the key. It's the guiding star that helps you get through your treatment and catalyses your recovery.

I see again and again that managing things like pain or nausea early, and taking painkillers or anti-sickness medication as advised, can help you stay stronger, tolerate treatment more easily, and avoid unplanned hospital admissions. It makes such a difference to your mood and energy levels as well, because getting worn down with discomfort can really take its toll.

Build a routine and be kind to yourself

Creating a gentle routine can make a real difference during radiotherapy. You don't need the pressure of a strict timetable, but having a steady rhythm around mouth care, eating, drinking, and rest really helps. Those regular touchpoints give a bit of structure and can help buffer some of the ups and downs that naturally come with treatment.

Try to include time for things that help you recharge and be kind to yourself. Radiotherapy can be demanding, and it's good to pause what you can and focus on you. Healing is hard work, and prioritising yourself is part of your treatment, not something to feel guilty about.

Eating and drinking during treatment



The aim during radiotherapy is to keep your nutrition and strength up as much as possible. Protein, nourishing calories, and important vitamins and minerals all help to maintain muscle mass, support your immune system, and give your body what it needs for healing and repair.

Keeping your weight steady also helps with how your treatment is delivered, and you'll be given individual guidance from your dietitian or wider team. In general, you may not need to make any changes to your eating in the first week or two of treatment. As things progress, though, many people find they need to adapt - choosing softer, moister foods with sauces or gravies, and leaning away from dry or rough textures such as crackers or muesli.

It's a very individual process, and your team will support you with specific guidance based on how things are going. If you've seen a Speech and Language Therapist as part of your care, they may have assessed what sorts of foods and drinks are safest and easiest for you to swallow, and it's important to keep following that advice throughout your treatment. The main thing is to adapt as you need to, based on how you're feeling and the guidance you're given.

Many people find that smaller, more frequent meals or snacks are easier than larger portions, especially when appetite changes. Eating little and often can make it easier to meet your nutritional needs over the day.

Fluids are another good opportunity to add nourishment as well as hydration. Think soups, broths, smoothies, milkshakes, yoghurt drinks, or kefir drinks. Every sip can make a difference.

If you're struggling to meet your needs through food alone, speak to your dietitian. They might suggest nutritional supplement drinks or a protein powder to help top up your intake while you're eating less.

Here are some practical ideas:

- **Eggs** - scrambled, omelette, soft-boiled, or added into meals for extra protein. You can even use them as a fortifier - for example, add a poached egg to a fishcake or stir a beaten egg into soup. Custard oats are another lovely option. If you like custard and you like porridge, what's not to like!
- **Fish** - fish with a sauce is usually easier to manage. Oily fish, such as salmon or mackerel, is especially good as it provides omega-3 fats that have anti-inflammatory properties. Try fish pie, fishcakes, or mackerel pâté.
- **Meat or poultry** - in my experience, poultry can sometimes be a little dry, so try it in a stew or with plenty of sauce or gravy. Meat that's cooked low and slow, such as stews and casseroles, keeps tender.

- **Plant proteins** - tofu (regular or silken), lentils (for example in soups, dahls, or casseroles), hummus, or falafel with dips. Softer beans like butter beans or cannellini beans can also work well if tolerated, and ground nuts are another way to add protein and healthy fats.
- **Dairy or alternatives** - yoghurt, Greek yoghurt, kefir, or milk-based smoothies. Cheese also works well as a fortifier - try grating it into soup or crumbling a little feta over a meal.
- **Nut and seed butters** - a versatile way to add beneficial fats and nourishing calories. Use them to make a dressing for roasted vegetables, drizzle over porridge or overnight oats, add a spoonful to milkshakes, or blend into frozen banana and peanut butter ice cream.
- **Drinks** - milk of choice, turmeric latte, cinnamon milk, vegetable juice, malted drinks made with milk, soups, or broths.
- **Hydrating foods** - melon, cucumber, yoghurt lollies, or anything that feels soothing and refreshing.



Some people find that avoiding extremes of very hot or cold food helps. If you notice a metallic taste, avoiding tinned foods, cooking in non-metal cookware, and using bamboo cutlery can also make meals taste better.

It's ideal to prepare some snacks in advance for days when you might feel more tired. Overnight oats, yoghurt pots, yoghurt lollies, cereal, hummus with falafel, or small egg muffins can all be easy, nourishing options to have ready.

Recovery and rebuilding

Finishing radiotherapy is such an important milestone, and it can bring the strangest mix of emotions. There's the relief of completing treatment, but also a sense of uncertainty as you say goodbye to the daily routine of hospital visits and those wonderful radiographers who have been cheering you on. You leave that cocoon of support and routine, and it can feel surprisingly bittersweet.

This is a time when your body and mind both need care and attention. Your skin and tissues are still responding to the treatment, and everything can feel as though it's catching up with you. This is when your focus really needs to be on healing.

I always advise people to give themselves the first few weeks after treatment with their diary as light as possible. This is the time to give your body the tools it needs to repair - that includes eating well, managing symptoms, moving your body in the way that feels right for

you, resting, and staying hydrated. Keeping up the simple things that supported you through treatment - regular meals, fluids, sleep, and mouth care - makes a real difference to how recovery unfolds.

If you've been given exercises by your speech and language therapy team, make sure you keep them going as advised. They play an important part in supporting your swallowing and speech, and in your long-term recovery.

Everybody's recovery is different. It's easy to compare yourself to others, but the experience of treatment, your body, and your recovery are all unique. Everybody's wearing their own shoes, so to speak. Give yourself time and grace. Healing isn't linear, and there isn't a set timeline.

Bolstering your recovery

Stay close to the people and things that lift you up - those who feel like sunshine and somehow help you recover just by being around them. In real life, it's not always possible to avoid everything that drains you, but where you can, try to make more room for the people and situations that leave you feeling brighter. Think of it as surrounding yourself with sustainers rather than drainers!

[The Swallows](#) offer a wonderful community of people who truly understand what treatment like this is like. They're there to share encouragement, companionship, and pearls of wisdom from their own experience whenever you need it, so don't hesitate to tap into that support.

And it's not only about people. You might find comfort in different things - hobbies, crafting, painting, time in nature, music, reading, or anything that brings calm and joy. Try not to narrow your focus too much; it can be a good time to explore something new or rediscover something you've always loved. These moments of creativity and connection can really help you feel more like yourself again.

Returning to "normality"

"Normal" looks different for everyone, and however you feel at this stage is completely valid. There's no right or wrong pace. Take things steadily and work with your team to find what feels right for you.

If you've finished treatment, remember that treatment itself is only one part of your care. Rehabilitation is just as important. It's the stage that helps you rebuild strength, restore function, and focus on quality of life - and it's a vital part of recovery. Pull on all the resources around you: your clinical team, rehabilitation services, community groups, and support networks. They're all there to help you get back to the best functioning and wellbeing you can.

If you are returning to work, many people tell me that sandwiches, once a lunchtime staple, can be tricky after treatment. If that resonates, you might like my [blog on practical alternatives to sandwiches](#), which includes plenty of soft, nourishing lunch ideas.

Recovery is about finding your own rhythm. You are the CEO of your body and your recovery. Trust your instincts, take one step at a time, and remember that your body continues to heal long after treatment finishes.

About the author

Meredy Birdi is a Registered Dietitian and Nutritional Therapist who has spent much of her career supporting people through head and neck cancer treatment and recovery.

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