Imagine every person living in New Hampshire, plus some 100,000 people being diagnosed with cancer this year. Does that sound unrealistic? Well, the National Cancer Institute projects that in 2009 alone, 1,479,530 people in the United States will be diagnosed with some form of cancer... that’s roughly the population of New Hampshire! (1) Cancer can mentally and physically take an extraordinary toll on its victims as well as their close friends and family. Soon after the initial diagnosis is made, patients are caught up in a frenzy of medical jargon, treatment options, medical appointments and tests. It can be difficult to grab hold of important everyday health considerations like proper nutrition. Although being diagnosed with cancer can be an extremely stressful and difficult time, resisting the temptation to indulge in junk food is more important than ever before.

A major component of many cancer treatment plans involves chemotherapy. Cancer is caused by rapidly dividing cells in the body. Chemotherapy works to combat this problem by stopping cancer cells from rapidly dividing or killing these cells. Unfortunately, in order to destroy the cancer cells, the health of non-cancer cells are sacrificed, leading to numerous, frustrating side-effects. (2) Some of these side effects include, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, fatigue and increased risk of developing an infection. (3) As previously mentioned, a healthy diet is critical during chemotherapy treatments, and good nutrition can dramatically improve some of the irritating side-effects involved. If you or a loved one have recently learned that they have developed cancer and are beginning chemotherapy treatments, take note of the ways in which good nutrition can help lessen the vicious side-effects of chemotherapy, and possibility expedite the healing process by improving overall health.

**Appetite Changes**

A change or loss of appetite is an extremely common side-effect for patients undergoing chemotherapy. Often, individuals will simply lose interest in eating or experience foods as tasting different or slightly metallic. This loss of appetite can lead to damaging weight loss and nutrient deficiencies. These consequences would be detrimental to a healthy individual, so their effects on those with cancer is magnified due to the compromised immune systems and bodily
functions of such individuals. Professionals suggest ways to enhance one’s interest in eating, in order to avoid significant weight loss and inadequate nutrient status:

- Eat with people that you are comfortable with and enjoying being around. This may increase the desire for food, and make the eating experience more pleasurable. (4)

- Try new and exciting foods. This is a great way to maintain an interest in eating, and to look forward to the next meal, rather than avoid it. (4)

- Eat with plastic utensils to eliminate the disagreeable metallic taste that is commonly experienced during chemotherapy treatments and can alter the flavor of many foods, leading to a decreased appetite and pleasure from eating. (4)

- Physical activity can increase hunger and appetite so adding some moderate exercise, if possible, may be very helpful in developing an appetite. Make sure to discuss with your doctor before beginning an exercise regimen during chemotherapy. (4)

**Nausea and Vomiting**

Another common side effect of chemotherapy is nausea and/or vomiting, which can have serious detrimental effects on nutritional status and weight. Severe nausea can make eating an extremely difficult task, but adequate nutrition and caloric intake is very important, so it is recommended that those experiencing severe nausea try some of the following tips:

- Eat fewer, smaller meals every day to keep food in the stomach to reduce nausea. (4)

- Try consuming calories and nutrients in liquid form such as soup, yogurt or smoothies, as foods with these consistencies are often easier to ingest. (4)

**Gastrointestinal Distress**

The chemotherapy treatments damage cancer cells as well as non-cancer cells which usually include those of the gastrointestinal tract, leading to constipation, diarrhea and lots of discomfort and aggravation. Constipation is an uncomfortable experience that can certainly make the unfavorable experience of chemotherapy feel much worse. Fortunately, there are dietary steps that one can take to reduce constipation:

- Dietary fiber intake is critical. Insoluble fiber, in particular, is very effective in “keeping things moving” and reducing or preventing constipation. This type of fiber is found in whole-grain breads and cereals, legumes and fruits and vegetables. (5)
Adequate fluid intake will also be very helpful in reducing constipation in those undergoing chemotherapy. (5)

Foods high in potassium are very important for those experiencing frequent diarrhea. If a person is experiencing consistent diarrhea, not only are they missing out on essential nutrient absorption, but they are likely to become dehydrated and experience electrolyte imbalance. Therefore, foods high in potassium that will help to restore an electrolyte imbalance such as bananas, potatoes and apricots are encouraged. (5)

Avoid spicy, greasy and acidic foods, as well as pastries, candy, caffeine and soft drinks as these foods can increase the risk and severity of diarrhea. (5)

In general, it is critical that patients undergoing chemotherapy receive adequate nutrition throughout the entire course of treatment. If symptoms that inhibit adequate nutrient intake, such as those discussed above, persist, then tube or IV feeding may be required. Supplements should also be considered for those who are worried about receiving sufficient nutrient intake. Most importantly, chemotherapy and its side effects do not need to control your life... follow the tips above and you or someone you love with cancer can live life to the fullest as their body heals.

References
1.) SEER stat fact sheets; Cancer. National Cancer Institute. 

2.) Cancer chemotherapy. Medline Plus. 


4.) Managing chemotherapy side-effects; appetite changes. National Cancer Institute. 
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