

NUTRITION AND CHRONIC PAIN

Creating healthy eating habits can be one tool in your toolbox for self-managing your pain. To date, there is no cure-all diet for pain, however healthy eating can benefit people with chronic pain in many ways. By taking an individualized approach to nutrition for pain management, you can positively impact the way you feel. Below are some practical tips for eating well when living with pain.

THE IMPACT OF NUTRITION ON PAIN

A well-balanced, healthy diet can positively impact pain in the following ways:

- Lowers pain response
- Reduce fatigue and improve energy levels
- Improve mood
- Improve the immune system
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Reduce the risk of (or help improve) certain diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, some cancers and heart disease
- Support healthy digestion
- Reduce inflammation

WHAT TO EAT

People living with chronic pain are often vulnerable to nutritional messages that are misleading and sometimes unsafe. For instance, there is a misconception that 'free-from' diets are healthier (i.e., gluten free, vegetarian, vegan, etc.). Although this may be true for individuals with medical requirements, this is not the case for the majority. **With so many nutritional strategies available, the best dietary approach overall is to aim for variety rather than focusing on limits.** It's important for you to follow trusted and credible nutrition advice provided by guidelines, such as Canada's Food Guide.

The Canada Food Guide includes the following recommendations:

1. Incorporating a wide range of foods from all food groups, to ensure a broad spectrum of nutrients:

- Have plenty of vegetables and fruits (visually: half your plate)
- Eat protein foods (visually: a quarter of your plate)
- Choose whole-grain foods (visually: a quarter of your plate)

2. Make water your drink of choice

Generally, it is recommended to eat processed food in moderation. This includes anything with additives, preservatives, artificial sweeteners, refined sugars, salt, and trans fats. For example, foods that can increase pain perception may include:

- Caffeine (Coke, chocolate, coffee, tea)
- Alcohol
- Aspartame
- MSG (in processed foods)
- Refined sugars

Although it is recommended to avoid these types of foods, it doesn't mean you can never have them. No food is "bad" or "good". Instead, some foods offer more nutritional value than others. Everything in moderation! Even small changes to your diet can make a big impact on your pain and health. **The most important guideline is to minimize your intake of processed food and focus on consuming minimally processed and whole foods.**

3. **It's important to take an individualized approach to diet.** For some individuals, they may notice a close correlation between what they eat and their pain levels. This may be particularly true for individuals with certain pain / medical conditions such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Endometriosis, Interstitial Cystitis / Bladder Pain, etc. If you notice that certain foods trigger pain flare ups, you may consider keeping a food journal or using an [app](#) to help you track how you feel after eating certain foods. It's important to speak with your health care provider when making dietary changes.

HEALTHY EATING HABITS

Consider not just what you eat, but **why, how and where**. Healthy eating habits extend beyond the types of food consumed, but also include meal timing, portion sizes, and the social contexts surrounding

eating that support physical and mental well-being. **Here are some considerations for establishing healthy eating habits:**

1. **Be mindful of your eating habits.** Mindful eating is the practice of paying full, nonjudgmental attention to the experience of eating, using all senses to enhance awareness, enjoyment, and emotional regulation. Mindful eating is guided by the following practices:

- Honor the food.
- Engage all senses.
- Serve in modest portions.
- Savor small bites and chew thoroughly.
- Eat slowly to avoid overeating.
- Eat regularly

To learn more about mindful eating, visit the following: nutritionsource.hsph.harvard.edu/mindful-eating

2. **Plan and prepare meals.** Preparing food when experiencing increased pain, fatigue, or low mood can make it more difficult to eat well. Therefore, it can be helpful to have a plan and potential options ready that are nutritious, quick, and easy. The following strategies may help you eat well despite increased symptoms:

- Use frozen, dried, and canned fruits and vegetables, as they are mostly prepared and affordable. Other pre-prepared foods such as grated cheese can also be helpful but can cost more.
- Use online grocery delivery services, if possible.
- For days when you're not feeling great or don't have the energy to cook, snacking can help you gain energy and nutrition without much effort. Rather than aiming for three larger meals, plan and keep some easy-to-prepare snacks for flare-up days or for when you're hungry generally (i.e., hummus and carrot sticks, nuts or mixed seeds, dried fruit, protein bars, protein shakes etc.).
- Cook big batches when you have a good day, label it with the date you made it, and freeze in ready-to-eat portions. For example, soup, chili, meat or vegetable curry, or casserole can be

divided into even portions and frozen. Slow cookers can be a helpful tool for bulk cooking that does not require as much work as traditional cooking practices.

- If your symptoms are too much, don't be afraid to use 'ready meals'. There are plenty of affordable and nutritious ones available, such as:
 - Better Meals: bettermeals.ca
 - Meals on Wheels

3. **Eat meals with others.** Enjoying healthy food with family, friends, neighbours, or co-workers is a great way to connect and share in cultural traditions. Sharing meals with others can support emotional well-being and deepen the experience of nourishment. Supportive social meals can reinforce these benefits, creating space for connection, presence, and a more positive relationship with food. To learn more about the benefits of social connection for pain, visit: [painbc.ca/social support and connection sheet](https://painbc.ca/social-support-and-connection-sheet).

EATING WELL ON A BUDGET

Eating healthy can be challenging for individuals with limited income. If you have limited resources for food, it's important to remember to simply do the best you can. **The following suggestions may support you in finding ways to eat healthy on a budget:**

- Prepare food at home, when possible.
- Buy large bags of frozen vegetables and fruit. Use what you need and keep the rest in the freezer.
- Buy fresh fruit and vegetables when in season (better quality at lower price).
- Skip organic. Organic foods can be quite expensive and aren't necessarily healthier. The nutritional value is the same. To learn more, visit the following link: canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/about-pesticides/pesticides-food-safety.html.
- Check for store deals, use weekly special and/or coupons.
- Plan your meals based on sales.
- Purchase no name brands and store brands.
- Use leftovers and avoid waste (i.e., store food properly, freeze, repurpose).
- Eat before you shop. Prevents impulse buying and unhealthy food choices.
- Consider incorporating more meat alternatives like dried beans, peas, and lentils.

- Utilize your local foodbank, pantry, community garden, nutrition coupon program, and produce recycle. To find food resources near you, you may consider visiting the following:
 - Food Banks Canada: foodbankscanada.ca/find-a-food-bank
 - BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program: bcfarmersmarket.org/coupon-program/how-it-works

Research affordable meal ideas (i.e., YouTube, social media, etc.). For example:

- Canada's Food Guide, Recipes: Canada's Food Guide, Recipes: canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-guide/eating-support/kitchen/recipes.html
- Kamloops Food Bank, Recipes: kamloopsfoodbank.org/recipes
- Clients in the Kitchen, Greater Vancouver Food Bank's Collaborative Cookbook foodbank.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Clients-in-the-Kitchen-1-compressed-1.pdf
- First Nations Health Authority, Food is Medicine, Recipe Book: fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-ISPARC-Food-is-Medicine-Recipe-Book.pdf

For more information about eating healthy on a budget, you may consider visiting the following [link](#).

RESOURCES

- [Pain Support Line](#): 1-833-261-7246
- Nutrition by LivePlanBe+: liveplanbeplus.ca/course/nutrition
- Coaching for Health: painbc.ca/coaching
- Pain Support and Wellness Groups: painbc.ca/supportgroups
- Making Sense of Pain: Online: painbc.ca/msop
- Healthy Eating by Pain U Online, Toronto Academic Pain Medicine Institute: tapmipain.ca/patient/managing-my-pain/pain-u-online/healthy-eating.html
- The Role of Nutrition in Chronic Pain Management, Dr. Sarah Robinson, MD, MSc. FRPC: youtube.com/watch?v=RGM8hNY-Zp8&t=299s
- Understanding the Gut-Brain Axis and Its Impact on Chronic Pain, Dr. Sarah Robbins, MD, MSc. FRPC: youtube.com/watch?v=a-9_hAHTdRs
- The Microbiome and Chronic Pain: Unlocking the Connection. Dr. Sarah Robbins, MD, MSc. FRPC: youtube.com/watch?v=NVGIrgKg8cE
- Vancouver Coastal Health, Arthritis Education: Register for free online classes to help you manage your arthritis: vch.ca/en/health-topics/arthritis-education#short-description--20446
- HealthLink 8-1-1, Dietitian Services: healthlinkbc.ca/find-care/healthlink-bc-8-1-1-services#paragraph-4577
- BC Dietitians: bcdietitians.ca

- Government of BC, Nutritional Benefits Program: healthlinkbc.ca/living-well/food-and-nutrition/policies-and-guidelines/food-security/overview-bc-provincial-and-federal-nutrition-benefits-programs
- HealthLink BC, Plan, Shop and Prepare: healthlinkbc.ca/living-well/food-and-nutrition/food-and-your-health/plan-shop-and-prepare
- Better at Home: betterathome.ca/
- BC Living, Food Boxes with Local B.C. Produce That Deliver Right to Your Door: bcliving.ca/food-drink/local-food/food-boxes-with-local-b-c-produce-that-deliver-right-to-your-door/
- Empowered Relief®: paincanada.ca/resources/empowered-relief
- Managing Pain Before and After Surgery: paincanada.ca/course/managing
- Pain BC, Find Help Directory: painbc.ca/find-help/resources/directory
- Pathways, Community Service Directory: pathwaysbc.ca/community
- Self-Management BC: selfmanagementbc.ca
- Power Over Pain Portal: portal.poweroverpain.ca
- Pain Recovery, MSP Group Medical Visits: painrecovery.ca
- Change Pain, MSP Virtual Groups: changepain.ca/services/msp-virtual-group-medical-visits

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<https://dieteticallyspeaking.com/how-to-eat-well-with-a-chronic-illness/>

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