PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

How To Follow a Level 7 Easy-to-Chew Diet

This information explains what a level 7 easy-to-chew diet is and how to follow it. It explains how to test your food's size and thickness. It also lists foods to include and avoid while following this diet.

What is a level 7 easy-to-chew diet?

A level 7 easy-to-chew diet is when you only eat foods that are soft, tender, and need less chewing. You can eat foods with different textures and thicknesses, including chopped, ground, and puréed foods.

On a level 7 diet, you will need to avoid these types of foods:

- Hard, dry, tough, chewy, or fibrous foods, such as fresh pineapple, raw vegetables, and nuts.
- Crispy, crunchy, and sharp foods, such as raw apples and corn chips.
- Foods that have a stringy texture and seeds, such as string beans, pumpkin seeds, and rhubarb.

- Sticky or gummy foods, such as caramel candies and dried fruits.

Why do I need to follow a level 7 easy-to-chew diet?

You may have to follow this diet if you:

- Have dysphagia (dis-FAY-jee-uh). Dysphagia is when you have trouble swallowing.
- Have trouble chewing hard foods, such as dried fruit.
- Have trouble chewing chewy foods, such as marshmallows.
- Had mouth surgery.
- Have lost feelings in parts of your mouth, such as your lips or tongue.
- Have trouble moving parts of your mouth.

How can I make sure my food is soft enough?

You can check your food's softness by doing a fork pressure test. Follow the steps in this section.

Your food's texture can change based on its temperature and how you cooked it. Test your food right before you start eating it to make sure it's the right softness.

Fork or spoon pressure test

Place your fork or spoon over your food. Using your thumb, press down on your fork or spoon until part of your nail turns white (see Figure 1). Your food is soft enough if it is completely squashed and does not go back to its original shape. Your food should also easily break apart with the side of a fork or spoon.

Figure 1. Fork or spoon pressure test

What can I eat on a level 7 easy-to-chew diet?

Here are some foods you can eat while following this diet. We also list some foods you should avoid.

These tables are not a complete list of foods you can eat on this diet. Other foods may be OK to eat if you test them and they are soft enough and the right size.

Milk and dairy

Milk and dairy to include	Milk and dairy to avoid

• Yogurt. • Cottage cheese and ricotta cheese. • Cream cheese and sour cream. • Cheese chunks. • Ice cream, frozen yogurt, gelato, milkshakes, and smoothies.	• Yogurt with hard toppings, such as nuts, coconut, and granola. • Any cheese spreads with coarse, hard-to-chew additives, such as nuts.

Proteins

Proteins to include	Proteins to avoid

• Red meat, including beef, pork, and lamb. • Poultry, including chicken and turkey. • Seafood, including fish, shrimp, lobsters, clams, and scallops. • Deli meats. • Bacon and sausage, if they are easy to chew. • Eggs and egg substitutes, including quiche. • Casseroles with tender meat or ground meat. • Smooth nut butters • Prepared soy foods, such as tofu or tempeh. • Prepared meat alternatives, such as veggie burgers. • Prepared, moistened legumes, such as dried beans, lentils, or peas. • Tuna, chicken, or seafood salads.	• Tough, dry red meats with bone. • Tough, dry poultry and fish. • Chunky nut butters and seed butters. • Whole nuts. • Well-done crispy bacon.

Vegetables

Vegetables to include	Vegetables to avoid

• All soft, cooked, vegetables.	• All raw vegetables. • Cooked vegetables that are fibrous or stringy, including green beans, peapods, and rhubarb.

Fruits

Fruits to include	Fruits to avoid
• All canned and cooked fruits. • Soft, peeled fresh fruits, such as peaches, nectarines, kiwi, cantaloupe, honeydew, and seedless watermelon. • Soft berries with small seeds, such as strawberries. • Avocado, including guacamole. • Moist, cooked raisins added to other dishes.	• Raw fresh fruits that are hard to chew or peel, such as apples, pears, prunes, and grapes. • Dried fruits, freeze-dried fruits, and fruit snacks. • Stringy fruits, such as apricots, pineapple, and mangoes.

Starches

Starches to include	Starches to avoid

• Baked potato without skin. • All well-moistened soft, cooked cereals. • All well-moistened cold cereals. • All starches, including couscous, pasta, quinoa, rice, and wild rice. • Croissant, plain sandwich bread and muffin. • Hot, open-face sandwiches with or without gravy. • Cold sandwiches.	• Baked potato with skin. • Thick crusted breads, such as French bread or baguettes. • Sandwich bread with nuts or seeds. • Dry crackers, chips, popcorn, and taco shells. • Popcorn and sticky rice cakes.

Fats

Fats to include	Fats to avoid
• Butter, margarine, and oils. • Avocado. • Mayonnaise, sour cream, gravies, and salad dressings.	• All whole nuts and seeds. • Coconut.

Soups

Soups to include	Soups to avoid

• All soups except those on the avoid list.	• Soups with tough meats or undercooked vegetables. • Soups with large chunks of meats or vegetables. • Unstrained corn or clam chowders.

Sweets and desserts

Sweets and desserts to include	Sweets and desserts to avoid
• Pudding, custard, and whipped toppings. • ice cream, sherbet, and sorbet. • Crustless New York-style cheesecake. • Gelatin (such as Jell-O®), flavored fruit ices, and popsicles. • Soft cakes.	• Cakes with dried nuts. • Dry cakes that are chewy, sticky, or very dry. • Chewy caramel and taffy-type candies.

Other

Other things to include	Other things to avoid

• Salt, pepper, ketchup, mustard, herbs, and spices. • Honey, sugar, and sugar substitutes. • All syrups, including chocolate syrup and maple syrup. • Whipped toppings. • Seedless jelly, jam, and preserves.	

Sample menu for a level 7 easy-to-chew diet

Use this sample menu to get ideas for making your own level 7 easy-to-chew diet meals.

Level 7 easy-to-chew diet menu	
Breakfast	• Cornflakes moistened with whole milk • Scrambled egg • Moist biscuit • Coffee or tea • Mandarin oranges
Mid-morning snack	• Vanilla yogurt • A glass of grape juice
Lunch	• Beef stew served over pasta • Canned fruit cocktail with cottage cheese topping • A glass of whole milk • A glass of juice

Mid-afternoon snack	• Low-fat cottage cheese with cantaloupe
Dinner	• Soft chicken with 2 tablespoons of gravy • Cooked potatoes • Cooked carrots • Canned diced peaches
Evening snack	• Pudding with strawberries

Tips for adding more calories to your diet

- Eat small meals 6 to 8 times a day instead of 3 main meals.
- Add 2 to 4 tablespoons of canned coconut milk or cream to smoothies, shakes, cereals, and yogurts for extra calories. You can also add it to dishes for extra calories, flavor, and moisture.
- Choose creamy soups rather than soups with clear broths.
- Have puddings and custards rather than gelatin desserts, such as Jell-O.
- Add sauces, gravies, butter, or extra vegetable oil to your meals.
- Drink fruit shakes or fruit smoothies made with yogurt or ice cream.
- Make ice cubes from milk or fruit nectar. Use these high-

calorie ice cubes in smoothies or to keep your shakes cold. As they melt, they will add calories to your drinks.

- Drink high-calorie drinks, such as whole milk, milkshakes, or pasteurized eggnog.
- Use oral nutrition supplements, such as Ensure® or Boost®, as a nutritious, high-calorie liquid base in smoothies and milkshakes.
- Add honey to smoothies, tea, yogurt, hot cereals, shakes, or ice cream.
- Add sour cream, half and half, heavy cream, or whole milk to your foods. You can add them to mashed potatoes, sauces, gravies, cereals, soups, and casseroles.
- Add avocado to dishes or smoothies and blend.
- Blend nut butters, such as peanut butter, into shakes and smoothies.

Tips for adding more protein to your diet

- Add pureed tofu to cooked vegetables, soups, or smoothies. You can also eat tofu instead of chicken or meat if you're having trouble eating animal proteins.
- Add pureed cooked eggs to your soups, broths, and cooked vegetables.
- Use plain full-fat Greek yogurt in smoothies, cream sauces, or wherever you would use sour cream.

- Use a plain protein powder, such as whey or pea protein powder, in liquids and shakes.
- Add full-fat ricotta cheese to moisten a dish and add calories and protein.
- Add cottage cheese to smoothies or pureed fruit.

Contact information

If you have questions or want to make an appointment with a clinical dietitian nutritionist, call 212-639-7312.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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