Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Minimal-Fat Diet

This information explains what a minimal-fat diet is and how to follow it. It also has sample menus.

About a minimal-fat diet

After you eat, the fat from your food travels through your lymphatic (lim-FA-tik) system before entering your bloodstream. Your lymphatic system helps fight infection and drain extra fluid from your body.

Sometimes surgery or an injury can harm your lymphatic system and cause it to leak fluid. This fluid can build up in your abdomen (belly), chest, or neck. When you eat fat, your lymphatic system makes more fluid for the fat to travel through. More fluid means more leaking.

A minimal-fat diet helps by limiting how much total fat you eat. When you eat minimal (very little) fat, your lymphatic system makes less fluid. This gives the leak time to heal.

The goal of a minimal-fat diet is to eat as little fat as possible. Aim to keep your daily fat intake as close to 0 grams as you can. Daily fat intake is the amount of fat you get from everything you eat and drink in a day.

Most people follow a minimal-fat diet for about 2 weeks. Some people may need to stay on this diet longer. Your healthcare provider will tell you when you can go back to your usual diet.

Following a minimal-fat diet for more than 2 weeks

Some people may need to be on a minimal-fat diet for more than 2 weeks. If you do, talk with your healthcare provider or clinical dietitian nutritionist. They may have you take some of the following, so you get enough nutrients while you're on this diet.

Vitamin and mineral supplements

Vitamin and mineral supplements help fill in nutrition gaps when you're not able to eat enough or your diet is limited. They come as tablets, capsules (pills), gummies, powders, and liquids. They can be:

- A single vitamin, such as vitamin C, D, or B12.
- A single mineral, such as calcium, iron, or zinc.
- A multivitamin (a mix of both vitamins and minerals).

Ask your healthcare provider or clinical dietitian nutritionist if you need to take any supplements. **Do not start taking a supplement before you talk with your healthcare provider or clinical dietitian nutritionist.**

You can buy vitamin and mineral supplements at your local supermarket or pharmacy. You also can order them online.

Make sure to read the supplement's label. Do not take more than the recommended daily amount (RDA) of any vitamin or mineral.

Oral nutrition supplements (nutrition shakes you drink)

Oral nutrition supplements give you extra calories and protein when you're not hungry or your diet is limited. They come as liquids or powders you can mix with liquids. Examples are Boost Breeze®, Carnation Breakfast Essentials®, Ensure Clear®, or Ensure Max Protein®.

You can buy oral nutrition supplements at your local supermarket or pharmacy. If the store does not have them, ask a pharmacist or store manager to order them for you. You can also order them online.

It's best to drink oral nutrition supplements between meals. If you drink them

with a meal, they can be filling. This keeps you from eating more of your food.

Medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs)

MCTs are a type of fat that your body absorbs (takes in) differently than regular fats. After you eat, the fat from the MCTs goes right into your bloodstream instead of through your lymphatic system.

MCTs help you get extra calories while keeping your daily fat intake low. This can be helpful if:

- You need to stay on a minimal-fat diet for more than 2 weeks.
- It's hard to get enough calories while you're on a minimal-fat diet.

Your healthcare provider or clinical dietitian nutritionist may suggest you use an MCT oil while on a minimal-fat diet. You can add it to many foods and drinks, such as salad dressing and coffee.

You can buy MCT oil at your local pharmacy, health food store, or online.

Do not use an MCT oil unless your healthcare provider or clinical dietitian nutritionist tells you to.

Nutrition Facts label

Use this guide to help you choose the best foods and drinks while you're on a minimal-fat diet. Make sure to check the Nutrition Facts label on packaged foods and drinks (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Nutrition Facts label showing 0 grams (0 g) of total fat in each 8 ounce (8 oz) serving

When you read the Nutrition Facts label, pay attention to:

- **Serving size.** This is the amount of food or drink that the numbers on the Nutrition Facts label are based on. All the calories, fat, protein, and other nutrients listed are for that exact serving size.
- **Total fat.** This tells you how many grams of fat are in 1 serving of the food or drink. Total fat includes all kinds of fat, such as saturated and trans fats.

Key points of a minimal-fat diet

- Eat foods with as close to 0 grams of fat as possible.
- Do not use any fat (such as butter, margarine, or oil) to cook food.
- Use nonstick pans to stop food from sticking when you cook, instead of oil or butter.
- Use fat-free condiments (such as ketchup and mustard), spices, herbs, garlic, and onions to flavor your food.

Minimal-fat diet guidelines

The tables in this section show what you can and cannot eat or drink on a minimal-fat diet. Items listed under the “Can Eat or Drink” column have 0.5 grams of fat or less in each serving.

Dairy	
Can Eat or Drink	**Do Not Eat or Drink**

• Fat-free:
  ◦ Milk or lactose-free milk
  ◦ Yogurt, Greek yogurt, or frozen yogurt
  ◦ Pudding
  ◦ Cottage cheese
  ◦ Ice cream
  ◦ Half & half
  ◦ Creamer
	• 1%, 2%, low-fat, or whole:
	  ◦ Milk
	  ◦ Yogurt, Greek yogurt, or frozen yogurt
	  ◦ Pudding
	  ◦ Cottage cheese
	  ◦ Ice cream
	  ◦ Half & half
	  ◦ Creamer

Meats, Meat Substitutes, and Proteins

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink
• Lite turkey breast, 2 oz • 99% fat-free ground turkey meat, 2 oz • Deli meats labeled as “fat-free” • Egg whites • Fat-free varieties of liquid egg substitutes (egg white-based or plant-based) • Shrimp, 3 oz • Scallops, 1.75 oz • Crab, 3 oz • Cod, 3 oz • Haddock, 3.5 oz • Pollock, 3 oz • Fat-free veggie burgers • Beans cooked without fat (such as kidney, black, pinto, white, and lima) • Lentils cooked without fat	• All red meat, including processed red meat (such as bacon, hot dogs, and sausages) • Deli meats not labeled as “fat-free” • Chicken • Egg yolks (the yellow part at the center of an egg) • Tofu • Tempeh • Seitan • Mussels • Squid • Tilapia • Salmon • Sardines • Mackerel • Trout • Catfish • All other fish and shellfish not listed in the “Can Eat or Drink” column • Chickpeas (garbanzo beans) • Soybeans

Fruits

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink

• Except for the fruits listed under the “Do Not Eat or Drink” column, you can have all other fruits in these forms:
  ◦ Fresh
  ◦ Frozen
  ◦ Jarred
  ◦ Canned
  ◦ Dried
  ◦ Jellies
  ◦ Jams
  ◦ Juices
	• Coconut
	• Avocados
	• Olives
	• Any fruit with toppings that have fat, such as whipped cream

Vegetables

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink

• Except for the vegetables listed under the “Do Not Eat or Drink” column, you can have all other vegetables in these forms:
  ◦ Fresh
  ◦ Frozen
  ◦ Jarred
  ◦ Canned
  ◦ Juiced
	• Jarred vegetables in oil
	• Any vegetables with:
	  ◦ Butter
	  ◦ Oil
	  ◦ Margarine
	  ◦ Sauces that have fat in them

Breads, Cereals, and Grains

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink

• Fat-free hot or cold cereals
• Fat-free white bread
• Fat-free muffins
• Fat-free rolls
• White pasta
• White rice
• Rice noodles
• Matzos
• Fat-free crackers
	• Any item with nuts, seeds, or coconut
	• All other pastas, rice, or noodles not listed in the “Can Eat or Drink” column
	• Whole-grain and whole-wheat products, such as:
	  ◦ Wheat berries/Bulgur
	  ◦ Brown or wild rice
	  ◦ Quinoa
	  ◦ Barley
	  ◦ Spelt
	  ◦ Buckwheat
	  ◦ Amaranth
	  ◦ Millet
	  ◦ Teff

Soups

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink
• Fat-free soups • Fat-free broths	• All other soups not listed in the “Can Eat or Drink” column • All other broths not listed in the “Can Eat or Drink” column

Drinks

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink
• Water, including carbonated (fizzy) and flavored water • Coconut water with no pulp • Coffee (black or with fat-free half & half or fat-free milk) • Tea with lemon or fat-free milk • Soda • Fruit and vegetable juices • Fruit punch • Fat-free hot chocolate with water or fat-free milk	• Coconut milk • Smoothies or shakes that have dairy products with fat, such as yogurt, ice cream, or milk • Nut milks, plant milks, nondairy creamers, and other dairy alternatives (such as almond milk, soy milk, and oat milk) • Some fruit juices (see items listed under the “Do Not Eat or Drink” column in the “Fruits” table) • Some vegetable juices (see items listed under the “Do Not Eat or Drink” column in the “Vegetables” table)

Oral Nutrition Supplements

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink
• Boost Breeze • Carnation Breakfast Essentials (powdered vanilla or powdered strawberry mixed with fat-free milk) • Ensure Clear • Ensure Max Protein (limit to 1 a day)	• Carnation Breakfast Essentials ready-to-drink or powdered chocolate • All other oral nutrition supplements that have fat in them

Desserts, Sweets, and Snacks

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink
• Fat-free hard candies and gummies • Marshmallows • Angel food cake • Fat-free cakes • Fat-free cookies • Fat-free pretzels • Fat-free potato chips • Air-popped popcorn	• All chocolate that has fat in it, including non-dairy and vegan • All other hard candies and gummies not listed in the “Can Eat or Drink” column • All cakes and cookies not listed in the “Can Eat or Drink” column • Pastries (such as croissants and Danishes) • Doughnuts • Pies • Microwave popcorn

Fats

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink

• Fat-free butter-type spreads (limit to 2 servings a day)
• Medium-chain triglyceride (MCT) oil
  ◦ Mix MCT oil with vinegar or lemon juice to make a salad dressing
  ◦ Mix MCT oil in fruit (such as applesauce)
	• Butter
	• Margarine
	• Cooking oil sprays
	• All other oils not listed in the “Can Eat or Drink” column
	• Regular, low-fat, or lite salad dressings
	• Regular, low-fat, or light mayonnaise
	• Nuts
	• Nut butters (such as peanut butter and almond butter)
	• Seeds (such as chia, pumpkin, sunflower, poppy, and sesame)
	• Seed butters (such as sunflower seed butter)
	• Olives
	• Coconut
	• Avocado

Condiments/Other

Can Eat or Drink	Do Not Eat or Drink
• Ketchup • Fat-free mustard • Fat-free mayonnaise • Fat-free salsa • Fat-free hot sauce • Soy sauce • Vinegar • Lemon juice • Pickles • Pickle relish • Plain horseradish • Sauerkraut • Fat-free salad dressings • Fat-free pasta sauce • Fat-free butter-type spreads (limit to 2 servings a day) • Maple syrup • Honey • Fat-free chocolate syrup • All herbs and spices • All seasonings (such as salt, pepper, garlic powder, and cumin) • Sugar substitutes (such as artificial sweeteners or plant-based sweeteners)	• Regular, low-fat, or light mayonnaise • Guacamole • Hummus • Any dip that has fat in it • Any item with added fat, such as tartar sauce, alfredo sauce, or any marinade with oil in it

Sample menus

Here are 2 sample menus to help give you meal ideas. We did not include portion sizes because everyone's calorie and protein needs are different. Eat or drink the amounts that work for your own nutrition goals.

These sample menus include Double Milk as a drink option. Double Milk has twice the number of calories and twice the amount of protein as fat-free milk. You can find the recipe for Double Milk after the sample menus.

Menu 1

Breakfast	• Farina with fat-free milk or Double Milk • Fat-free Greek yogurt • Toasted fat-free white bread with jelly • Berries • Coffee with fat-free half & half or fat-free milk
Mid-morning snack	• Fat-free pretzels • Pear
Lunch	• Fat-free black beans over white rice, topped with fat-free salsa and fat-free Greek yogurt • Fat-free milk or Double Milk • Fresh pineapple • Fresh carrots
Afternoon snack	• Air-popped popcorn
Dinner	• Mixed green salad with fat-free dressing • White spaghetti with fat-free tomato sauce • 3 oz cod • Green beans cooked in fat-free broth • Toasted fat-free white bread with garlic powder
Evening snack	• Fat-free frozen yogurt over angel food cake with maple syrup

Menu 2

Breakfast	• Hard-boiled egg whites with fat-free salsa or ketchup • Fat-free muffin • Fresh orange • Tea with lemon and honey
Mid-morning snack	• Double Milk with fat-free chocolate syrup
Lunch	• Fat-free cottage cheese with fruit • Fat-free crackers with apricot jam • Fat-free milk • Cucumber slices
Afternoon snack	• Fat-free yogurt • Pear
Dinner	• Fat-free veggie burger with ketchup and fat-free mustard • Baked sweet potato with marshmallows • Homemade coleslaw (shredded cabbage, carrots, onions, fat-free mayonnaise, and vinegar) • Apple
Evening snack	• Fat-free ice cream with fat-free chocolate syrup

Double Milk recipe

To make Double Milk:

1. Mix 1 quart of fat-free milk with 1 packet of non-fat, dry milk powder. Mix them together well.
2. Put the mixture in the refrigerator until you're ready to use it.

Contact information

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

To talk with a clinical dietitian nutritionist, ask a member of your care team for a referral.

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

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