

Eating well for healing

Good food won't make an operation heal overnight, but eating well genuinely helps your body do its repair work – and eating poorly can slow it down. After surgery your body is busy: knitting a wound together, laying down new tissue, and mending tendon or bone. All of that runs on the food you give it. The good news is that you don't need anything special, fancy or expensive. A normal, balanced diet, with a little attention to a few things, covers almost everything your healing needs.

Protein – the main building block

If you remember one thing, make it this: **protein is the raw material your body repairs itself with**. New skin, healing tendon, bone and the cells that fight infection are all built from it. In the weeks after surgery your need for protein actually goes *up*, just when many people are eating a bit less than usual.

Try to include a protein food at **every meal** rather than saving it all for dinner:

- lean meat, chicken, fish (tinned fish like tuna or salmon is easy)
- eggs
- milk, cheese and yoghurt
- beans, lentils and chickpeas
- tofu, nuts and nut butters

You don't need to weigh or count anything. A simple rule of thumb is a palm-sized serving of a protein food at each main meal, plus protein-rich snacks like a yoghurt, a handful of nuts, cheese and crackers, or a glass of milk.

Enough energy overall

Healing burns energy, so your body needs **enough fuel** to do it. This is **not the time for a crash diet or to try to lose weight** – cutting your intake right back leaves your body short of the energy it needs to mend, and recovery can stall.

Aim to eat regular, balanced meals as you normally would. If your appetite has dropped – which is common after an operation, an anaesthetic, or while you're on strong painkillers – it often works better to eat **small amounts more often** rather than facing a big plate. Nourishing snacks between meals, and choosing foods you actually feel like eating, both help while your appetite finds its feet again.

The vitamins and minerals that help you heal

A varied diet with plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrains supplies the vitamins and minerals your repair work relies on. The ones that matter most after surgery are:

- **Vitamin C** helps build collagen, the scaffolding your body uses to close and strengthen a wound. It's in citrus fruit, berries, kiwifruit, tomatoes, capsicum and leafy greens.
- **Zinc** supports wound healing and your immune system. Good sources are meat, seafood, eggs, dairy, nuts, seeds and wholegrains.
- **Vitamin D and calcium** matter especially after a **fracture or bone surgery**, because they're what bone is rebuilt from. Calcium comes from dairy, fortified plant milks, tinned fish with soft bones and leafy greens; vitamin D mostly comes from sunlight, with smaller amounts in oily fish and eggs. If you've had bone surgery, it's worth a look at our **bone health** page.
- **Iron** helps carry oxygen around your body and rebuild your blood – useful if you lost blood during your operation. Red meat, eggs, beans, lentils and green vegetables all supply it, and having a vitamin-C food alongside helps you absorb the iron from plant sources.

You'll notice these all come from ordinary, everyday foods. Eat a reasonable mix across the week and you'll cover them without thinking too hard about any single one.

Keep things moving – fibre and fluids

One very common, very unwelcome part of recovery is **constipation**. Strong pain medicines (especially anything with codeine or oxycodone in it) slow the bowel right down, and being less active than usual makes it worse. A little planning heads it off.

- **Drink plenty of fluids** through the day – water is ideal. This alone makes a real difference.
- **Eat fibre:** fruit, vegetables, wholegrain bread and cereals, oats, beans and lentils all help keep things moving.
- **Keep gently active** within whatever limits we've given you – even short, regular walks help your bowel along.

If you know you'll be on strong painkillers for more than a day or two, it's sensible to keep up the fluids and fibre from the start, and to ask your pharmacist about a gentle laxative rather than waiting until you're uncomfortable.

Do you need supplements?

For most people, the answer is **no**. If you're eating a reasonably balanced diet, you'll get what you need from food, and there's no good evidence that piling on extra vitamin pills makes a healthy person heal faster.

The sensible exception is **correcting a known shortfall**. If a blood test has shown you're low in something – vitamin D or iron are the usual ones – then topping that up genuinely helps. That's different from taking a handful of supplements “just in case.” If you're already taking supplements, or you're thinking about a specific one, it's worth a quick word with us or your GP, as some can interact with medicines or shouldn't be taken around surgery. (Our separate page on **nutritional supplements for musculoskeletal health** goes into this in more detail.)

If you have **diabetes**, there's one thing worth real attention: keeping your **blood sugars well controlled**. High blood sugar interferes with healing and raises the risk of wound problems and infection, so the weeks around surgery are a good time to be on top of your levels and to follow your usual diabetes advice closely.

Eating one-handed while your arm's out of action

After upper-limb surgery, the practical problem often isn't *what* to eat but *how* to prepare and eat it with one arm in a sling. A bit of forward planning makes a big difference:

- **Stock easy, no-fuss protein:** yoghurt, cheese, tinned fish, eggs, milk, nut butter, hummus, baked beans, pre-cooked chicken.
- **Prepare ahead while you can.** Batch-cook and freeze meals before your operation, or cook extra in the days after so you've got portions ready to reheat one-handed.
- **Buy things ready to go:** pre-cut vegetables and fruit, grated cheese, microwave rice, ready meals, and easy-open packaging.
- **Set yourself up to eat comfortably** – a non-slip mat under the plate stops it sliding, and simple tools make a sandwich or a one-pot meal far easier than something needing a knife and fork together.
- **Accept help.** If family or friends offer to drop in a meal or do a shop in the first week or two, say yes – it's one of the easiest ways for them to help, and it takes the pressure off.

Seek advice if

Most people eat their way through recovery without any trouble. But have a word with us, your GP or a dietitian if:

- your **appetite is persistently poor**, or you're **losing weight without meaning to**
- you're having **trouble swallowing**, or food or drink makes you cough or choke
- you have **diabetes** and your sugars are running high or are hard to control
- you've been **told you have a deficiency** (such as low iron or vitamin D) and aren't sure how to put it right

Eating well is one of the few parts of recovery that's genuinely in your own hands. You don't have to get it perfect – just aim for regular, balanced meals with protein at each one, plenty of fluids, and enough variety to cover the vitamins and minerals. Your body will do the rest.