

# Tips for Healthful Weight Gain

Initially after a brain injury, you may experience a decrease in appetite and dietary intake. This can be due to medical problems, changes in mood, poor appetite, difficulty chewing and swallowing, and taste changes. Inadequate nutrient intake and your body's response to your injury can lead to weight loss. Weight and muscle loss can result in weakness, feeling tired, and an inability to participate in daily activities.

It is important to consume adequate calories and protein to help maintain energy and muscle mass. The right amount of calories and protein help your body fight infection, maintain muscle mass, and help prevent skin breakdown. If you are underweight, the goal for healthy weight gain is a gain of ½ to 2 pounds per week. This can usually be accomplished by eating at least 250-500 more calories per day than you normally do. If your doctor or dietitian has told you that weight gain is appropriate for you, the following tips may help you achieve a healthy weight.

**How to Increase Calories in the Event of Excessive Weight Loss** (Consult with your doctor first since there may be dietary restrictions related to general health, level of arousal and/or ability to swallow.)

- Start by eating 3 meals and 2-3 snacks per day.
- Set an alarm to remind you to eat if you are not experiencing regular hunger cues or have a hard time remembering to eat.
- Include energy dense foods such as: nuts and nut butters, dried fruits, cheese, granola bars, and avocados.
- Try nutrition supplement drinks like Ensure Plus, Boost Plus, Equate Plus (Walmart brand), Carnation Instant Breakfast or regular milkshakes.
- Try to include a protein-rich food with each meal and snack. Foods high in protein include: eggs, milk, yogurt, cheese, meat, poultry, fish, dried peas and beans, nuts, and nut butters.
- Add gravy, cream sauces or cheese sauces to meats or vegetables.
- Add oils or butter to cooked vegetables, grains, or meats.
- Use whole or 2% milk in place of water or skim milk in drinks, snacks, and in cooking.
- Use full fat condiments like mayonnaise, sour cream, and salad dressings in foods.

**In addition to a loss of appetite, it is common to experience nausea and vomiting after a brain injury. If these feelings are present, try these suggestions:**

- Try eating dry foods, such as toast or crackers.
- Avoid taking medications on an empty stomach unless instructed to by your doctor/pharmacist/nurse.
- Avoid hot foods or foods with significant smells/odors if you are sensitive to the smell of foods.
- Eat frequent smaller meals and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Sit up for at least 30 minutes after eating.
- Eat slowly.
- Take sips of cold clear drinks like water, fruit juice, or sports drinks throughout the day.
- Stay on top of your bowel regimen to avoid constipation, which can worsen nausea.
- Avoid gas-forming foods like onions, cabbage, broccoli or dried beans.

**If You Have Problems Finishing Meals:**



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- Play soft music or watch TV while eating.
- Eat in a calm environment.
- Eat small frequent meals and snacks every 2-3 hours.
- Eat your energy dense foods like meats and starches before lower calorie foods like fruits and vegetables.
- Drink liquids one hour before or after meals (not with meals).

## **If There is a Loss of Appetite from Changes in Taste:**

- Experiment with different seasonings to increase preference for foods. For example, if foods are too sweet, try adding a little bit of salt or vinegar. If foods taste too salty, try adding some sugar.
- Eat foods cold or at room temperature.
- If you have problems consuming meats, add chopped meat to casseroles or salads or try eating meats in a sandwich.
- Cook with spices, herbs, and sauces that you like.
- If foods taste metallic, try eating with plastic silverware instead of metal silverware.