

Information for Patients and Caregivers

Food Safety during COVID-19: What People with Cancer Should Know



It's important to include plenty of fruits and vegetables in your diet, but during times of stress and uncertainty, allow yourself to eat what tastes good and feels good in your body, says MSK dietitian Cara Anselmo.

Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges of getting and preparing food safely may be even greater for people with cancer and cancer survivors. Here, clinical dietitian Cara Anselmo offers guidance.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we've been told to wash our hands frequently, sanitize surfaces, and not touch our faces. On top of that, conflicting reports are circulating online about how to safely handle the food that we're bringing into our homes.

The challenges of safely buying groceries and getting takeout may be even greater for people with cancer and cancer survivors, who often have weakened immune systems. This makes it harder for their bodies to fight off infections, including COVID-19. It's important that people with cancer closely follow steps to protect themselves while still getting proper nutrition.

Memorial Sloan Kettering clinical dietitian Cara Anselmo offers guidance for people with cancer and their families on how to carefully get and prepare food during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Cara Anselmo

What safety measures should you take while grocery shopping?

If you are in active treatment for cancer or you have a weakened immune system because of a cancer history or other medical conditions, it's better to have someone else in your household or a neighbor or friend go to the store for you, or use a delivery service. That's the most important way you can avoid exposure to COVID-19 or other infectious germs.

But if you do have to go to the store, here are some important tips:

- Take a grocery list. Before you go, figure out exactly what you need so you can get in and get out fast. This also helps minimize the number of shopping trips.
- Bring sanitizing wipes to disinfect the handle of the shopping cart or basket.
- Don't browse with your hands. When you are at the store, avoid touching food or other products that you don't intend to buy.
- Cover your face with a scarf or cloth mask. (In early April, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended](#) that all Americans wear a face covering to protect themselves from COVID-19.) If you need to adjust your mask, be careful not to touch the part that touches your face.

- Check to see if your store has special hours for people who are immunocompromised and read the store's policies on how many shoppers are allowed inside at once. While you are in the store, be careful to maintain a proper distance of six feet from others.

Do you need to disinfect your groceries after bringing them into your home?

At this time, experts are not aware of COVID-19 being spread by food or food packaging. But it's still important to carefully **wash your hands** before and after grocery shopping. You should also wash your hands after putting your groceries away.

If you are concerned about the surfaces of packages, you can use disinfectant products to wipe them off. Fresh fruits and vegetables should be carefully washed with running water. Never use Lysol or bleach on fruits and vegetables, since the chemicals could be ingested.

How can you safely get takeout or food delivery from restaurants?

A lot of the advice for grocery shopping is the same for getting takeout or delivery: You should wash your hands before and after touching bags and food packages from restaurants, and before eating.

If you are picking up takeout, make sure you maintain safe distances. If you are getting delivery, pay in advance and ask the delivery person to leave the food outside your door to minimize person-to-person contact.

With either takeout or delivery, you should always transfer food to your own plates and dishes.

People whose immune systems are compromised by cancer or cancer treatment should be careful about eating certain foods from restaurants. This includes things like prepared salads, cut fruit, and deli meats. This is important to avoid food poisoning and not specifically because of COVID-19.

Do you have tips for healthy eating during the COVID-19 pandemic?

MSK's nutrition experts have created recipes to help people make sure they get proper nutrition during and after cancer treatment. [Learn more.](#)

If you can't get fresh produce, frozen or canned fruits and vegetables can be just as healthy. If you normally buy organic foods and you are not able to get them, don't worry. Organic foods are not necessarily healthier or safer than conventional foods.

In this time of stress and uncertainty, it's especially important to practice mindful eating. That means you should only eat when you're hungry. Don't eat so much that you feel too full. Do the best you can to include plenty of fruits and vegetables, but give yourself permission to eat what tastes good and feels good in your body. There's no such thing as a perfect diet.

Some dietary supplements are claiming that they improve your immune function and offer protection against COVID-19. What do we know about these products?

Some of these products may be dangerous and potentially even life-threatening. The government has issued warning letters to many companies making these claims about their products.

MSK's About Herbs database provides evidence-based information from experts about herbs, vitamins, and other dietary supplements. [Learn more.](#)

There have been claims that some familiar supplements, including vitamin C and zinc, may "boost" your immune system. Some studies show that these supplements stimulate the immune system, but the evidence is inconclusive. They can also lead to unwanted effects.

Make sure you talk to your doctor, nurse, or registered dietitian before taking any supplements. Some of these products may also interfere with cancer treatment.

The best way to keep your immune system strong is to eat a balanced diet, limit alcohol, stay hydrated, manage stress, stay as physically active as you can, and get enough sleep.


During this difficult time, many people may be struggling to put food on the table. What are some good resources for MSK patients and their families?

MSK's [Food to Overcome Outcome Disparities program](#) connects patients with a variety of emergency food resources. This includes a food pantry that MSK operates for patients and their families. If you would like more information, you can discuss it with your MSK care team or call MSK's nutrition office at [212-639-7312](tel:212-639-7312).

New York City is offering [three free meals per day](#) for both children and adults, with pickup at more than 400 sites. People who are age 60 and older and need assistance can also get [home-delivered meals](#).

— Julie Grisham

Cara Anselmo, MS, RDN, CSOWM, CDN, is a clinical dietitian nutritionist.

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