Eating well

Guidance for people living with COPD
Why is eating well important?

Undernutrition (being underweight and/or experiencing recent unintentional weight loss) can have negative impacts on health in everyone, including those with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). Eating well is important to maintain a healthy weight and fight infections.

Undernutrition in people with COPD can lead to:

- Reduced lung and breathing function
- Reduced mobility and ability to do usual daily activities
- More frequent visits to the GP and hospital admissions

This leaflet is designed to provide advice on how to increase food and calorie intake for people living with COPD who might be at risk of undernutrition.

Why are those with COPD at risk of undernutrition?

Losing weight is common in people living with COPD. There are a number of different reasons why you might eat less:

- Feeling breathless can make it harder to eat a large amount, or finish a meal, and tasks such as shopping and cooking can be more difficult
- Increased tiredness or lack of energy
- Dry mouth as a side effect of medication and treatments
- Changes to the way food tastes
- Social situations such as bereavement, loneliness, or mobility issues
- Psychological factors such as depression or anxiety can reduce appetite

People with COPD may have an increased energy demand and need to eat more food, as their body uses up more energy to breathe and fight infections.
Making eating easier

- If feeling breathless, it may be easier to eat **smaller meals** and snacks **more frequently** throughout the day, rather than 3 large meals.

- Try adjusting your diet to include **softer foods** such as casseroles, soups, curries, rice and mashed potato, which are more easy to chew and swallow.

- Try to **drink after and between meals**, as drinking before and during can create feelings of early fullness.

- Chewing sugar-free **gum** can help to prevent a dry mouth, making eating easier.

- **Experiment with different foods** if your taste preferences have changed as a result of COPD, and try to make food more appealing by adding things such as herbs, spices and cheese to create **stronger flavours**.

If you are losing weight unintentionally

- If you are living with COPD and are losing weight unintentionally, you should firstly see your **GP** to rule out other illnesses which could affect your weight.

- **Try to have a healthy, balanced diet as well as increasing calorie intake:**
  - Base your meals on **starchy foods** such as pasta, potatoes, rice or bread
  - Try to eat at least 5 **portions of fruit and vegetables** a day
  - Include **2-3 portions of protein** foods a day, such as meat, fish, beans, lentils, eggs and dairy products. Protein is important for healthy muscles, including those used in breathing
  - Aim to eat **3 portions of dairy products**, which contain calcium (or calcium enriched dairy alternatives), to help strengthen bones. Additional sources of calcium include tinned fish, tofu, green leafy vegetables, nuts, and beans
  - To gain weight, include **high calorie foods** such as fried foods, chocolate, cakes*

*If you have diabetes, it’s important to monitor your blood sugars and speak to your diabetes health professional about your diet.
Increasing calorie intake

Choose full fat products (such as whole milk) and high calorie foods, and avoid ‘diet’ food and reduced fat options.

Include nourishing drinks in your diet, such as smoothies, milk, or milky drinks such as Horlicks, Ovaltine, hot chocolate, milkshakes or milky coffee.

Add honey or jam to foods such as porridge, yoghurt or toast*.

Fortify everyday foods such as soups, mashed potato and casseroles by adding things such as cream, grated cheese, and milk. This will increase calorie content without increasing portion size.

Food choice

A sample menu could include:

- **Breakfast**: Porridge with honey or jam
- **Snack**: Full-fat yoghurt with tinned or seasonal fruit
- **Lunch**: Vegetable soup with added cream and bread roll
- **Snack**: Banana milkshake made with whole milk
- **Dinner**: Beef casserole with rice and steamed vegetables
- **Dessert**: Sponge cake and custard
- **Evening drink**: Horlicks or hot chocolate made with whole milk

Try snacking on your favourite foods and treats when you don’t have much of an appetite.

*If you have diabetes, it’s important to monitor your blood sugars and speak to your diabetes health professional about your diet.
Food shopping & cooking

It’s important to eat well to maintain a healthy weight. If food shopping or cooking makes you feel tired or breathless:

- Attend a lunch club or try to eat with family or friends on a regular basis
- Ask a friend or family member to help with cooking or shopping, or use online food shopping (e.g. Ocado, Asda or Tesco)
- Use meal delivery services such as Meals on Wheels, Wiltshire Farm Foods or Oakhouse Foods
- Choose meals that are quick and easy to prepare, or use pre-prepared foods such as cooked chicken and frozen vegetables
- Make extra portions when you cook and freeze them for times when it’s more difficult to prepare a meal

Local organisations and charities such as Age UK may also be able to provide additional support.

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle

Exercise should form part of a healthy lifestyle even if you are underweight, as it helps to keep your lungs and body strong.

Try gentle exercises such as walking, swimming, yoga and Tai Chi. Having a high calorie snack after exercise will help to prevent weight loss.

Everyone has a healthy weight range for their height. You can find out yours by using a Body Mass Index (BMI) calculator (available from NHS Choices website) or by asking a health professional. This will help you to identify a target weight.
If you or someone you know are concerned or are losing weight unintentionally, it's best to seek individual advice from your Practice Nurse or GP. Your community pharmacist may also be able to provide support and advice.

Your local community organisation, charities (e.g. British Lung Foundation) and the local council can also provide information and suggest a range of support options available to you.

If you are on a special diet (e.g. medical condition, allergy or intolerance) and need advice on how to adapt your diet, speak to you GP or Practice Nurse. They may be able to refer you to a dietitian if appropriate.

Email nutrition@wessexahsn.net for more information about undernutrition.