

From Plate to Purpose

Therapeutic cooking in cancer care



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People undergoing cancer treatment often face significant challenges with food, including loss of appetite, taste changes, fatigue and uncertainty around what they should or should not eat. As a result, cooking and eating can become extremely overwhelming.

For nearly a decade, I have had the privilege of running therapeutic cookery workshops for people living with cancer. These sessions combine nutrition education with hands-on cooking, offering participants practical strategies to manage treatment-related side effects and rebuild their confidence and enjoyment around food.

While dietetic consultations provide essential personalised support, evidence shows that group-based cooking interventions offer a complementary form of learning, which can improve dietary intake, quality of life and wellbeing for people affected by cancer.¹ A 2024 review found that of 37 programmes for patients with cancer, 97% included nutrition education, 59% included cooking activities, and more than half actively involved participants in food preparation.² Dietitians and nutritionists delivered over half of these programmes, reflecting the vital role our profession plays in helping people translate nutrition knowledge into everyday practice.

My workshops incorporate all these elements, with an additional focus on social connection, practical skills and empowering participants to rediscover the pleasure in eating. Participants can see, smell and taste food while practicing cooking techniques in a supportive environment. The aims of the workshops are to:

- Provide evidence-based guidance on healthy eating during and after cancer treatment, with particular emphasis on achieving adequate protein intake;
- Offer practical strategies for managing treatment-related side effects, such as fatigue, taste changes and gastrointestinal symptoms;
- Build confidence with simple, affordable recipes that can be replicated at home; and
- Create opportunities for social interaction and peer support.

These sessions are a great step to improving the physical and mental wellbeing of patients with cancer in a group setting and provide a valuable opportunity to highlight early warning signs of malnutrition, such as unintentional weight loss or reduced appetite, and encourage timely referral to dietetic services.

Cancer-related malnutrition remains common and is associated with poorer treatment tolerance, reduced quality of life and increased healthcare costs.³ While food-based strategies are always prioritised, some patients, particularly those experiencing weight loss, reduced appetite or treatment-related symptoms, may struggle to meet their nutritional requirements through diet alone, especially given their higher protein requirements.^{4,5} In this patient group, these interventions should sit alongside individualised dietetic support, which may include the use of high protein oral nutritional supplements (ONS) where clinically indicated, to prevent or manage malnutrition.

Setting up a cookery workshop

The workshops started with opening of The Macmillan Horizon Centre nine years ago. When this Centre was being built, I took part

in a focus group, which also included patients and patient advocates. We advocated for an on-site café and a dedicated teaching kitchen. The on-site café not only helps with access to ingredients for the workshop but has allowed us to develop the Horizon Food Bank and subsequently the Horizon Community Garden, where we can reduce waste worries, spend time in nature, and have access to fresh produce.

While a purpose-built teaching kitchen is ideal, similar sessions can be delivered using portable equipment such as induction hobs, slow cookers or blenders in community centres or hospital education rooms. If you have the chance to engage in similar planning (e.g. for community centres, Maggie's Centres, or cancer support hubs), highlight how culinary facilities can enhance patient experience and wellbeing.

Participant referral, staffing and scheduling

All patients with cancer at any stage of their journey are eligible for the programme, and can self-refer through the Macmillan Centre, their clinical nurse specialist or psychological support services. We also have specialist provision, teenage and young adults (TYA) sessions, and run themed festive workshops.

We run the cookery workshops with a minimum of three team members:

- **Oncology Dietitian:** leads nutrition education and supports individual questions,
- **Chef:** provides culinary demonstrations, tips and adaptations,
- **Macmillan volunteer:** supports preparation, set up and participant assistance.

The cookery classes run for three hours, typically 10:30am-1:30pm. A later start helps accommodate fatigue and enables older adults to use travel passes. For TYA groups, we start later to better suit their routines.

What we cover in the Cookery Workshops

Our dual aim with the workshops is to provide nutrition education and social interaction. We share nutrition information and guidance and have a mix of demonstrations and active cooking to boost their confidence. This also allows participants to make and taste the food before they buy.

We start the workshops with introductions and expectations, screening for allergies or support needs, and health and food safety reminders (especially as some participants may be immunocompromised).

Nutrition education

We share the World Cancer Research Fund cancer prevention recommendations as well as healthy eating recommendations in cancer, including the importance of protein and especially plant-based proteins, healthy breakfasts and nutrition myth busting. This session also allows people the opportunity to ask questions. As we know, there is an unmet need in access to dietitians and there is no shortage of nutritional misinformation online and from peers. There are trends in the topics asked; at the moment, there are lots of questions around high protein, fasting and sugar.

We also cover how to manage the side effects of treatment; the top three most popular topics are how to manage fatigue, taste changes and gastrointestinal problems. To help patients manage taste changes, we share tips such as using different herbs and spices in cooking, and infusing water with different flavours to support adequate hydration. We talk about using aromatics such as ginger, garlic and chilli; we use fresh in the workshop but discuss using pureed versions to help those with neuropathy and reduced coordination. Water infused with lemon, lime and mint gives a tangy, cooling drink; it is also a good alternative to sugary drinks.

Additionally, we have a resource pack for participants containing information on the recipes and healthy eating recommendations.

Cooking demonstrations

Based on participant feedback, the main takeaways they want are ideas for their new tastes that are simple and cost effective. We promote cupboard and frozen ingredients, introduce new ingredients, and share recipes that are accessible and easy to cook. We place a particular focus on plant-based proteins to help with the recommendation to reduce consumption of red and processed meats, and to increase the intake of fibre. For example, we use Quorn pieces and Quorn sausages in recipes, share tips on how to marinate tofu and how to cook quinoa in vegetable stock to boost flavour, and suggest using paprika to give a smoky flavour when avoiding processed meat.

Incorporating active cooking in the workshop is a key element, as it boosts confidence and demonstrates how simple the recipes are, so participants are more likely to start making these recipes at home. In a class, each participant has their own workstation and make or try up to 10-12 dishes to take home, and it can be a great sense of achievement. Participants prepare a range of simple, affordable dishes such as:

- **Pea and mint soup** (112 kcal, 4.8 g protein, 28p per portion): a convenient way to make fresh homemade soup from frozen peas and leftover veg, ideal for patients who feel fatigued. Using a soup maker makes it even easier as it saves chopping, cooking and blending.
- **Spanish sardines** (213 kcal, 19 g protein, 94p per portion): showcases an easy-to-use tinned food that tastes delicious and gives an opportunity to talk about the benefits of omega-3 and calcium.

References: 1. Iglesias-Cans M, *et al.* (2026). Culinary Nutrition Interventions for Those Living with and Beyond Cancer and Their Support Networks: A Systematic Review. *Curr Oncol.*; 33(2):76. 2. Johnston EA, *et al.* (2024). A Scoping Review of Group Nutrition Education and Cooking Programs for People Affected by Cancer. *J Acad Nutr Diet.*; 124(10):1302 - 1327.e1. 3. Arends J, *et al.* (2017). ESPEN expert group recommendations for action against cancer-related malnutrition. *Clin Nutr.*; 36(5): 1187-1196. 4. Arends J, *et al.* (2017). ESPEN guidelines on nutrition in cancer patients. *Clin Nutr.*; 36(1): 11-48. 5. Arends J, *et al.* (2021). Cancer cachexia in adult patients: ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines. *ESMO Open.*; 6(3): 100092.

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About the British Specialist Nutrition Association

BSNA is the trade association representing manufacturers of products designed to meet the particular nutritional needs of individuals; including specialist products for infants and young children (including infant formula, follow-on formula, young child formula and complementary foods), medical nutrition products for diseases, disorders and medical conditions, including oral nutritional supplements, enteral tube feeding and parenteral nutrition, as well as companies who aseptically compound chemotherapy, parenteral nutrition and CIVAS.



- **Miso Quorn pieces with pickled cucumber tzatziki** (162 kcal, 23 g protein, £2.06 per portion): participants get an opportunity to try Quorn, and the tzatziki gives a cooling flavour that can be added to other meals to help with taste changes.
- **Date and nut balls** (152 kcal, 4.6 g protein, 41p per 40g ball): these are easy to make ahead to bring with them to appointments and is a nice alternative to cakes and biscuits. A plus is they are good for their children and grandchildren too!

Social interaction

Another key aim of the workshop is to provide a sense of peer support and social interaction to address the psycho-social aspects of cancer care. Many participants describe the workshops as a safe place to speak openly with others going through similar experiences. The shared activity of cooking often encourages conversation and mutual support, which can help reduce feelings of isolation that are common during cancer treatment.

Patient feedback

Participant feedback has been extremely positive. All participants reported being completely satisfied with the amount of cooking and practical skills taught, and 95% reported being completely satisfied with the nutritional information provided. When asked to describe their experience from the sessions, common responses included fun, informative, positive and practical. Some lovely participant feedback shared has been:

"Really appreciate the effort and time that goes into this – really doing it and tasting with others is so different from reading and doing it on my own."

"Nice to feel part of something that feels normal."

"What a fun session and so, so helpful when you are feeling fatigued following chemotherapy and radiotherapy. You guys are a total inspiration."

Future plans and resources

Looking forward, we are developing additional workshops for those who have specialist needs, particularly those who require texture modification, for example patients with head and neck and upper gastrointestinal cancers, and hope to evaluate our programme in a more objective way.

Dietitians can play a leading role in developing and evaluating these programmes. If you are considering setting up a cookery workshop, I highly encourage you to, it is a very rewarding experience. There are lots of recipes on World Cancer Research Fund's Cook Through Cancer to get you started, and Life Kitchen have helpful tips and recipes for patients experiencing taste changes. Another key step is to increase the evidence base behind these programmes as there is a clear gap. If you are running a programme, consider setting up audits to evaluate their effectiveness, sustainability and cost effectiveness.