

# Healthy Eating and Breast Cancer



Breast  
Cancer  
Network  
Australia



## About us

Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) is the peak national organisation for Australians affected by breast cancer. We provide a range of free resources, including the *My Journey Kit* for women newly diagnosed with breast cancer and *Hope & Hurdles* for women with secondary breast cancer. Our free quarterly magazine, *The Beacon*, includes stories from women sharing their experiences, as well as information on a wide range of breast cancer issues. Visit our website [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au) for more information or to connect with others through BCNA's online network.

BCNA's partners and sponsors raise much needed funds to ensure we can continue to support people affected by breast cancer.

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## Introduction

Healthy eating has significant benefits for general health and wellbeing. Combined with regular exercise, healthy eating provides you with energy to tackle day-to-day activities, and helps you maintain a healthy body weight and manage stress. In the long term, healthy eating combined with regular exercise improves your overall health, reduces your risk of developing illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease, and makes you feel good.

Healthy eating is important to many people with breast cancer. Not only does it help you feel better; it gives you something over which you can take control at a time when your life may feel somewhat out of control.

*Diet is one thing that we can control on this breast cancer rollercoaster. – Viv*

It can be difficult to maintain a healthy diet when you are not feeling great and are facing the challenges of breast cancer treatment. This booklet explains the benefits of eating well after a breast cancer diagnosis and includes practical tips to help you to maintain a healthy diet over time.

*I enjoy being proactive with my eating. Good nutrition combined with meditation, living in a stress-free environment, daily walking and deep breathing are all sound ingredients that I have comfortably woven into my lifestyle. – Margot*

## Healthy eating

Healthy eating means eating a diet that includes a variety of healthy foods (such as vegetables, legumes, fruit, protein, foods that contain calcium, wholegrain breads and cereals), cutting back on the not-so-healthy foods, and continuing to enjoy treats you love in moderation.

*I've been told by a lot of people in the know that the best 'cancer diet' is a regular, healthy balanced diet. – Bobbie-Jo*

You may hear about 'special' diets for people diagnosed with cancer; however, there is no scientific evidence that women diagnosed with breast cancer need to follow a special diet or eat particular foods to prevent the cancer returning. It is recommended that women with breast cancer follow the same dietary guidelines that are recommended for all Australian adults.

A healthy, balanced diet includes foods from the following five food groups:

- Vegetables, legumes and beans
- Fruit
- Grains and cereals (mostly wholegrain) such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, oats and quinoa
- Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds
- Dairy foods (mostly reduced fat) including milk, yoghurt, cheese or alternatives such as almonds with skin, canned sardines or salmon, and firm tofu.

*We need to eat the same balanced diet that is recommended for everyone (lots of vegetables, some fruit, wholegrain foods, plenty of fibre, fish, lean meat) and reduce processed foods (especially processed meats) and alcohol. I was told by my oncologist not to cut out dairy products because we need them for calcium. – Janet*

Drinking enough water every day is also important. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends that adult women drink eight 250 mL glasses of water daily (around 2 L). It is best to drink plain water although other water-based drinks, such as tea, can contribute to this total.





## HOW TO UNDERSTAND FOOD LABELS

### What to look for...

Don't rely on health claims on labels as your guide. Instead learn a few simple label reading tips to choose healthy foods and drinks, for yourself. You can also use the label to help you lose weight by limiting foods that are high in energy per serve.

#### Nutrition Information

Servings per package – 16  
Serving size – 30g (2/3 cup)

	Per serve	Per 100g
<b>Energy</b>	432kJ	1441kJ
<b>Protein</b>	2.8g	9.3g
<b>Fat</b>		
Total	0.4g	1.2g
Saturated	0.1g	0.3g

#### Carbohydrate

Total	18.9g	62.9g
Sugars	3.5g	11.8g

**Fibre** 6.4g 21.2g

**Sodium** 65mg 215mg

**Ingredients:** Cereals (76%) (wheat, oatbran, barley), polylumf husk (11%), sugar, rice, malt extract, honey, salt, vitamins.

#### Ingredients ▲

Listed from greatest to smallest by weight. Use this to check the first three ingredients for items high in saturated fat, sodium salts or added sugar.

#### ◀ 100g Column and Serving Size

If comparing nutrients in similar food products use the per 100g column. If calculating how much of a nutrient, or how many kilojoules you will actually eat, use the per serve column. But check whether your portion size is the same as the serve size.

#### Energy

Check how many kJ per serve to decide how much is a serve of a "discretionary" food, which has 600kJ per serve.

#### Sugars

Avoiding sugar completely is not necessary, but try to avoid larger amounts of added sugars. If sugar content per 100g is more than 15g, check that sugar (or alternative names, for added sugar) is not listed high on the ingredient list.

#### ◀ Sodium (Salt)

Choose lower sodium options where similar foods. Foods with less than 400mg per 100g are good, and less than 120mg per 100g is best.

**Other names for added sugar:** Dextrose, fructose, glucose, golden syrup, honey, maple syrup, sucrose, malt, maltose, lactose, brown sugar, caster sugar, maple syrup, rice sugar, sucrose.

**Other names for high salt ingredients:** Baking powder, calcium salt, garlic salt, meat/yeast extract, monosodium glutamate, MSG, onion salt, rose salt, sea salt, sodium, sodium acetate, sodium bicarbonate, sodium citrate/di/tri, stock cubes, vegetable salt.

#### Total Fat ▶

Generally choose foods with less than 10g per 100g.

For milk, yogurt and cream, choose less than 7g per 100g.

For cheese, choose less than 19g per 100g.

#### Saturated Fat ▶

Aim for the lowest, per 100g. Less than 3g per 100g is best.

**Other names for ingredients high in saturated fat:** Animal tallow, beef fat, butter, coconut oil, milk solids, coconut, coconut oil, coconut, cocoa butter, cream, ghee, dripping, lard, suet, tallow oil, tallow, tallow, vegetable shortening.

#### Fibre ▶

Not all labels include fibre. Choose breads and cereals with 3g or more per serve.

The table below outlines the recommended daily number of 'serves' of each food group, and how much is in a serve.

Recommended daily serves of each food group				
Food group	Serves for women aged 19–50	Serves for women aged 51–70	Serves for women aged 71+	What is a serve?
Vegetables and legumes/beans	5	5	5	Around 75 g (100–350 kJ) which is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ½ cup cooked vegetables</li> <li>• 1 cup raw vegetables</li> </ul>
Fruit	2	2	2	Around 150 g (350 kJ) which is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 medium apple, banana, orange or pear</li> <li>• 2 small apricots, kiwi fruits or plums</li> <li>• 1 cup diced or canned fruit (no added sugar)</li> </ul> Or occasionally: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 125 ml (½ cup) fruit juice (no added sugar)</li> <li>• 30 g dried fruit (e.g. 4 dried apricot halves, 1½ tablespoons of sultanas)</li> </ul>
Grain/ cereal foods – mostly wholegrain	6	4	3	500 kJ which is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 slice (40 g) bread</li> <li>• ½ medium (40 g) roll or flat bread</li> <li>• ½ cup (75–120 g) cooked rice, pasta, noodles, quinoa, oats</li> <li>• ⅔ cup (30 g) wheat cereal</li> <li>• ¼ cup (30 g) muesli</li> <li>• 3 (35 g) crisp bread</li> </ul>
Lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds and legumes/beans	2½	2	2	500–600 kJ which is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 65 g (90 g raw) cooked lean red meats such as beef, lamb, veal or pork</li> <li>• 80 g (100 g raw) cooked lean poultry such as chicken or turkey</li> <li>• 100 g cooked fish (about 115 g raw) or one small can of fish</li> <li>• 2 large (120 g) eggs</li> <li>• 1 cup (150 g) cooked or canned legumes/beans such as lentils or chick peas</li> <li>• 170 g tofu</li> <li>• 30 g nuts, seeds, nut butter or tahini</li> </ul>
Milk, yoghurt, cheese or their alternatives – mostly reduced fat	2½	4	4	500–600 kJ which is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup (250 ml) of milk</li> <li>• 2 slices (40 g) of hard cheese</li> <li>• ½ cup (120 g) ricotta cheese</li> <li>• ¾ cup (200 g) yoghurt</li> </ul> The following alternatives contain around the same amount of calcium as a serve of dairy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100 g almonds with skin</li> <li>• 60 g sardines, canned in water</li> <li>• ½ cup (100 g) canned pink salmon with bones</li> <li>• 100 g firm tofu</li> </ul>

Note:  
the recommended daily serves differ for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

*I try to eat seasonal foods; a bit of this and a bit of that, spices and herbs too. I also go for walks because they make me feel more relaxed afterwards. – Kathy*



## Foods to limit

Some foods and drinks have little nutritional value and should only be eaten occasionally and in small amounts.

*I love chocolate so I have a small amount occasionally. You don't have to deny yourself but rather ration the treats out a bit. Only keep enough in the cupboard for a small treat. – Tonya*

## Foods with high sugar and saturated fat content

It is recommended that you cut back on the amount of sugar and saturated fat in your diet. Foods high in sugar and saturated fat include biscuits, cakes, confectionery, butter, cream, fried foods, crisps, pastry and soft drinks. These foods and drinks can contribute to weight gain and the development of chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes.

## Salt

While some salt (sodium) is important for your health, most Australians eat too much. Too much salt can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and kidney disease. Most salt we eat is found in processed and packaged foods such as hot chips, crisps, salted nuts, packet soups, baked beans, canned vegetables, pies, sausages, pizza and ready-made meals.

## Alcohol

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends that healthy Australian adults drink no more than two standard alcoholic drinks a day, and aim for two alcohol free days a week. Cancer Council Australia recommends people avoid drinking alcohol if possible, or follow the NHMRC recommendation if alcohol is included in your diet.

One 'standard drink' in Australia contains 10 grams of alcohol. As an example, 100 ml of wine is one standard drink. It's important to note that quite often one serving of alcohol may contain more than one standard drink. For example, if you pour yourself a glass of wine and fill the glass, the glass may contain around 200 ml of wine, which is equivalent to two standard drinks.

If you would like more information about healthy eating, or nutrition advice for your individual situation, speak with an accredited practising dietitian ([www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au)).

*I took advice from the hospital dietitian about foods that were good for me.*

*– Kathryn*

## Tips for maintaining a healthy diet

Below are some tips to help you maintain a healthy diet in the long term. Rather than trying to change too many eating habits at once, try changing one or two a week. Once you master those, gradually change more habits.

- Only eat when you are hungry. Try not to eat for the sake of it, or because it is something to do.
- Eat slowly, chew every mouthful and monitor how hungry or full you feel. Stop when you feel full.
- Do not skip breakfast – it kick starts your metabolism and helps you to avoid overeating later in the day.
- Eat regularly throughout the day. Do not let yourself get too hungry as you are more likely to overeat during your next meal.
- Plan your meals and snacks for the week and buy everything you will need in advance.
- Try grilling instead of frying foods.
- Use oil spray instead of oil.
- Substitute cream with light coconut milk or low fat yoghurt.
- If you want a high energy food, buy the smallest amount that will satisfy you, and the best quality you can afford.
- Keep a food diary to help you keep track of what you are eating.
- Tell your family and friends that you are interested in healthy eating, and ask them to encourage you.
- Use a smart phone or tablet 'app' that can help you keep track of the food you are eating throughout the day (see the 'More information' section of this booklet for suggested apps).
- Set regular non-food related rewards for eating well, for example, a pedicure.

*I fill my fridge from the farmers market every weekend, and make fresh salads throughout the week. Red meat once a week, some oven baked chicken and fresh salmon (or canned if unavailable.) My husband is 100 per cent with the plan, and we are both enjoying the benefits of top nutrition. – Michelle*

### When you're short on time

- Try doing your grocery shopping online.
- Keep a selection of frozen vegetables in the freezer.
- Cook food ahead of time and freeze into meal-sized portions.
- Stock up on healthy frozen meals from the supermarket. Some can be high in salt so be sure to read the nutrition panel on the packaging.
- Consider using a company that will deliver healthy meals to your home for a fee.

### Eating well on a budget

- Planning your meals for the week before you go grocery shopping helps you eat well and spend less. Plan your meals and snacks, and write a shopping list of groceries you will need. Only buy the items on the list.
- Avoid grocery shopping when you are hungry to avoid impulse purchases.
- Spend most of your money on foods from the five food groups.
- Buy fresh produce that is in season. Almost any vegetable can be cooked in stock and pureed to make soup.
- Go shopping late in the day when supermarkets, markets and greengrocers tend to have special offers.
- Drink water instead of juice or sweetened drinks. Try adding a wedge of orange or lime for flavour.
- Freeze leftovers for other meals.
- Buy smaller amounts of lean meat, skinless chicken and fish and extend meals by adding less expensive food such as legumes, vegetables and grains.
- Consider growing vegetables in your own garden. You do not need a large space; using pots on a deck or balcony can provide plenty of space.



*Since diagnosis I concentrate on including lots of fresh fruit and vegetables in my diet. It is interesting the reasons that people come up with for not buying food that is good for you. Expense is often mentioned. We spend money all the time on things that are not good for us! My berries cost less than a piece of cake and a coffee or a bottle of wine for example. Having cancer has cost me so much (in both financial terms and quality of life). I now think spending money on good quality food is not an extravagance but a very wise investment in my own and my family's future. – Deanne*

### **Eating well when you are fatigued**

- Try sitting instead of standing when preparing meals.
- Try using kitchen appliances such as a food processor to help reduce the amount of food preparation you need to do manually.
- Use pre-prepared ingredients such as grated cheese, diced meat and frozen vegetables to reduce your workload.
- Use recipes that only call for one pot or pan to reduce the washing up.
- Avoid eating large meals which may make you feel sluggish.
- Consider doing most of your cooking in the morning when you are less likely to be tired. Meals can then be kept in the fridge and reheated in the microwave when needed.
- Try to keep healthy snacks on hand that require little to no preparation, such as nuts, pre-cut carrot and celery sticks and hummus.
- Ensure your freezer is well stocked with pre-cooked meals.

## Eating out

- When you need to eat fast food, choose low fat options such as wraps or sushi rolls.
- Choose a lean piece of meat, skinless chicken or seafood.
- Avoid fried, battered, crumbed and pastry options; instead choose steamed, pan fried, braised, poached, baked, roasted or grilled foods.
- Ask for an entrée size or share a main with someone else.
- If your meal normally comes with chips, ask for salad or vegetables instead.
- Limit high fat, high salt sauces and toppings such as cheese and mayonnaise.
- Avoid large serves of pasta and rice dishes with high fat sauces.
- Finish with fruit or share a dessert if you want one.
- Drink water before and with your meal.
- Limit alcohol and alternate alcoholic drinks with water.



## Staying motivated

### Setting goals

It can be challenging to change eating habits. It may help to ask yourself why you want to be healthier. Do you want to complete day-to-day activities without getting tired? Do you want to lower your risk of diabetes and heart disease? Perhaps you want to fit into some old clothes?

### Eating well

From the list below, select your most important reasons for eating well or add your own:

Lose weight

Maintain a healthy weight

Have more energy throughout the day

Feel better about myself

Reduce my risk of developing diabetes and heart disease

Help to manage unwanted treatment side effects

Take charge of my health

Setting short and long-term goals, and rewarding yourself when you reach them, can help to motivate you.

When writing your goals down, we suggest you follow the 'SMART' method to help you reach them.

**S**pecific – What exactly do you want to achieve?

**M**easurable – How many minutes or days? Or how many times per week?

**A**chievable – Is your body capable of achieving your goal?

**R**ealistic – Does your goal realistically fit into your lifestyle?

**T**ime frame – In what time frame do you want to achieve your goal?

## My short-term goal

Write a short-term goal that you would like to work towards. For example, what eating habits would you like to change this week?

For example, *'This week I will start to improve my eating habits by ensuring that I eat breakfast every day, and only allow myself to eat three squares of chocolate every other day. If I do this for two weeks, I will reward myself by getting a manicure.'*

This week I will start to improve my eating habits by \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ and next week I will start to  
\_\_\_\_\_.

If I keep up these healthy eating habits for \_\_\_\_ weeks, I will reward myself by \_\_\_\_\_.

## My long-term goal

Write a long-term goal that you would like to work towards. For example, what long-term benefit would you like to achieve from exercising, and when would you like to achieve it?

For example, *'I would like to lose 5 kilograms before Christmas this year. If I manage to do this, I will reward myself by booking a weekend trip away.'*

I would like to \_\_\_\_\_  
by \_\_\_\_\_.

If I achieve this my reward will be \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

*Make changes slowly. As with everything to do with cancer, take it one step at a time. Rather than totally changing your diet, look at how you can make your normal meal healthier. For example, I loved pancakes on a Sunday for breakfast. Now I make wholemeal pancakes with stevia rather than sugar, only have two small ones, add fruit, nuts and a spoonful of organic yoghurt. Filling, more nutritious but still special. – Deanne*

## Keeping a food diary

Keeping track of the food you eat may help you to improve your eating habits because you will see, at a glance, everything you eat throughout the day.

	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				



To download a diary with additional space,  
visit [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au).

If you do not achieve all your healthy eating goals, this is not a failure. Be pleased you have made a start. Try focusing on the goals you were able to complete, and gradually work towards meeting more.



Snacks	Water	Comments

*e.g. what made you eat?  
– feeling hungry, feeling sad or tired, to be social etc.*

For a list of websites and 'apps' that allow you to keep a food diary electronically, see the 'More information' section of this booklet.



## Nutrition during treatment

Some breast cancer treatments can cause unwanted side effects, including:

- loss of appetite
- changing the way food tastes or smells
- feeling sick (nausea)
- having a sore mouth or oesophagus
- constipation and diarrhoea
- weight gain
- fatigue.

Eating a healthy and nutritious diet during this time is especially important and will help to ensure your body has what it needs to function better and recover from treatment.

Throughout your breast cancer treatment, try to ensure that your diet is as healthy as you can manage, using information in the 'Healthy eating' section of this booklet as a guide. Your diet does not have to be perfect, but do the best you can.



The Cancer Council's *Nutrition and cancer* booklet provides helpful information on ways to manage common eating problems that may occur due to cancer or its treatment. It also includes information about support services which may be available to you.

Visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au) or phone 13 11 20 to download a copy or to see if your local Cancer Council can post you a copy.

If you are experiencing side effects that are affecting your food intake or have caused you to lose a lot of weight, an accredited practising dietitian can provide you with information and advice (see the 'More information' section of this booklet to find a dietitian near you).

## Managing advice from others

After a diagnosis of cancer, some women notice that people around them provide advice on different issues, including what they think you should be eating or drinking to supposedly improve your health. Some can be quite forceful with their advice. People tend to provide advice because they care about you. However, if it is not helping you or is causing you distress, try telling them that their advice is not helpful. If you feel uncomfortable telling them directly, ask someone else to speak with them for you.



## Maintaining a healthy weight

Weight gain is very common after a breast cancer diagnosis (weight loss is less common). Weight gain can occur for a variety of reasons, including the onset of menopause as a side effect of treatment, reduced activity levels, and changes in eating habits.

Weight gain can make women feel guilty, and impact their body image and self-confidence. If you have gained weight since your diagnosis, be kind to yourself and know that many women have trouble maintaining their weight after diagnosis.

*Don't panic if you put on weight – it's quite common. Try to keep a healthy diet and exercise as much as you physically can. – Cathy*

Maintaining a healthy weight has many important benefits for women diagnosed with breast cancer. It can help to improve:

- self-confidence and body image
- concentration
- energy levels.

It can help to reduce:

- blood pressure
- cholesterol levels
- the risk of developing other health conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes
- the risk of the breast cancer coming back.

There have also been some research studies to suggest that losing a small amount of weight after a breast cancer diagnosis may help to reduce your risk of breast cancer recurring. More research is needed to better understand this relationship and how important it may be.

To find out if you are at a healthy body weight, you can calculate your Body Mass Index (BMI) using the following formula:

$$\text{BMI} = \frac{\text{(weight in kilograms)}}{\text{(height in metres} \times \text{height in metres)}}$$

For example, if you weigh 75 kg and are 1.69 m (or 1.69 m) tall, you would calculate your BMI as follows:

$$\text{BMI} = 75 \div (1.69 \times 1.69) = 26.3$$

After you have calculated your BMI, you can see whether you are at a healthy weight by using the following table:

BMI	You are
Less than 18.5	underweight
between 18.5 and 24.9	healthy weight
between 25 and 29.9	overweight
above 30	obese

In this example, a woman who has a BMI of 26.3 is considered overweight.

Another way for you to see if you are at your healthiest weight is by measuring your waist circumference roughly in line with the belly button. It is recommended that women aim for a waist measurement of less than 80 centimetres.

If you find that you are above your healthy weight, it's important to remember that the safest and most effective way to lose weight is to do it slowly. A realistic amount of weight to lose each week is about half a kilogram. This may vary from week to week, for example, you may find that you lose no weight in one week and 1 kg in another. Strict diet and exercise regimes that result in rapid weight loss are difficult to maintain and usually result in weight gain over the long term.

The healthiest way to lose weight is to:

- eat a healthy balanced diet, based on plenty of fresh vegetables, fruit, wholegrain breads and cereals, and reduce the amount of fatty, salty and sugary foods in your diet
- exercise regularly – if you already are, consider increasing the amount or intensity of exercise.

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For information on exercise after a breast cancer diagnosis, BCNA's *Exercise and breast cancer* booklet can help. The booklet aims to help women diagnosed with breast cancer to exercise regularly, and contains information on the benefits of exercise, the amount of exercise recommended for women diagnosed with breast cancer, practical strategies to stay motivated, and an exercise diary to keep track of achievements. The booklet also contains information on diet and weight loss. To download or order a copy, visit [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au).

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If you would like to lose weight, speak with your doctor or an accredited practising dietitian ([www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au)) who can give you advice for your individual situation.

*I put on 14 kg after chemotherapy. I decided that I had to help myself. Weight loss is hard because I love my food, but it had to be done. I joined Weight Watchers and have lost about 7 kgs so am half way there, but am also starting to feel a little better and have more energy. I felt like I have been given a second chance so I have to help myself now. I also walk 40 minutes, five days per week. Once you finish treatment, give yourself time for the dust to settle and then make a plan for your recovery. It's hard at the start but it gets better. – Joanne*

*Exercise is key to our continued recovery. I do yoga, stretching, walking along the beach, and 30 minute treadmill sessions. In my own mind, it is the reason I coped so well with surgeries, chemo, and radiation. It is two years since I was diagnosed, and I can honestly say that I feel better now than before the surgery. Good food and exercise is something we can all do for ourselves. It also makes us feel better to be proactive. – Michelle*

## Complementary medicines

### What are complementary medicines?

Complementary medicines are products that are taken in addition to conventional medical treatments such as chemotherapy and hormone therapies. Most complementary medicines are taken orally. Some examples of complementary medicines include:

- vitamin and mineral supplements
- herbal medicines, including Chinese and Ayurveda medicines
- homeopathic remedies (liquid that is usually sold in dropper bottles).

### Should I use a complementary medicine?

It's best to carefully consider the use of any complementary medicines and seek advice from a member of your medical team about any medicines or supplements you are using or considering.

Some complementary medicines can cause unwanted side effects. They can also interfere with prescription medicines, including breast cancer medicines, and can make your breast cancer treatments less effective. For example, vitamin C supplements can interfere with some chemotherapy treatments, and St John's Wort can reduce the effectiveness of tamoxifen and some chemotherapies.

Sometimes your doctor may suggest you use a complementary medicine. For example, vitamin D may be recommended if you are taking an aromatase inhibitor (Arimidex, Femara, Aromasin).

Before starting any complementary medicine, talk to a member of your medical team to discuss any possible effects it may have on your breast cancer treatment and health.

## Questions to ask about complementary medicines

If you are considering taking a complementary medicine, you may like to ask your doctor and your complementary medicine therapist the following questions:

- How do you think this complementary medicine will help me?
- Do you know if this complementary medicine will interfere with any of the medicines I am taking or plan to take?
- Is it okay to take this complementary medicine at the same time as my other medicine, or should I take it at a different time?
- Will I have any side effects from this complementary medicine?
- What should I do if I experience any of the side effects?
- How long should I use this complementary medicine and how will I know if it is working?
- Who will provide me with the complementary medicine?
- What qualification, training and experience does the complementary medicine therapist have?
- What is the cost of the complementary medicine?
- Is the complementary medicine covered by private health insurance?

If you experience any adverse side effects after taking a complementary medicine, it is a good idea to talk to your doctor as soon as possible.

*Always check with your doctor before using any supplements or complementary medicines, as they will know what will interact with your treatment. It would be terrible to go through treatment and have it not work properly because of an interaction with something you took without checking. – Deanne*

## Myth busting

There are many myths about healthy eating and breast cancer, and sometimes it's hard to know what to believe and what to ignore. Below are some of the more common myths you may hear.

If you have read or heard something not covered here, you can submit a question to the Cancer Council's iHeard website ([www.iheard.com.au](http://www.iheard.com.au)) and they will respond with an evidence-based answer.

If you are still concerned, you may like to talk to your doctor or an accredited practising dietitian.

### Should women diagnosed with breast cancer ...

#### *... follow an alkaline diet?*

The 'alkaline diet' promotes eating fewer 'acidic' foods and more 'alkaline' foods. Those following the diet believe it better maintains the body's pH, allowing the body to function better.

The body is able to very effectively regulate its acid/alkaline balance by itself. There is no good quality evidence to show that an 'alkaline diet' can prevent or treat diseases such as cancer. Further, many of the foods that the diet suggests you avoid contain important nutrients that your body needs to function well.

#### *... avoid dairy products?*

There appears to be no link between consuming dairy products and the risk of breast cancer.

Dairy foods are an important part of a healthy, balanced diet as they contain calcium which is vital for building and maintaining healthy bones. This is especially important for women diagnosed with breast cancer, as a number of treatments (particularly hormone therapy drugs) can affect bone health.

#### *... avoid soy products?*

There is no evidence that a moderate intake of soy products is harmful. Women diagnosed with breast cancer should avoid soy or phyto-oestrogen supplements, and avoid a sudden increase in the amount of soy phyto-oestrogens in the diet.

Phyto-oestrogens are natural substances in plant foods that act like the hormone oestrogen.

### *... avoid red meat?*

There is no good quality evidence of an association between eating red meat and breast cancer. However, eating red meat and in particular processed meat (cured with the addition of preservatives and/or other additives) seems to be linked with a small increased risk of bowel cancer. Despite some concerns about meat and cancer, the Cancer Council recognises that lean red meat is an important source of dietary iron, zinc, vitamin B12 and protein.

Cancer Council Australia recommends:

- eating moderate amounts of red meat: 65–100 g of cooked red meat, three to four times a week
- limiting consumption of processed meats (e.g. salami, frankfurts, bacon and ham) which are high in fat and salt
- avoiding burnt or charred meat.

### *... avoid sugar?*

Eating sugar will not cause cancer or make cancer cells grow faster. However, a diet high in sugar contributes to weight problems and being overweight is a risk factor for developing cancer and for breast cancer recurring.

### *... avoid drinking alcohol?*

There is some evidence that alcohol may increase the risk of developing breast cancer; however, it is not clear whether alcohol increases the risk of a breast cancer recurrence. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends that healthy Australian adults drink no more than two standard alcoholic drinks a day. Cancer Council Australia recommends people avoid drinking alcohol if possible, or follow the NHMRC recommendation if alcohol is included in your diet.

### *... only eat organic food?*

There is currently no evidence that organic fruits and vegetables reduce your risk of developing cancer compared with conventionally produced fruits and vegetables.

One large observational study of 623,080 women in the United Kingdom found that those who always or mostly ate organic food were no less likely to develop breast cancer than women who ate a more conventional diet.

Eating organic food is a personal choice. If you are concerned about pesticide residue, it is a good idea to wash your fruit and vegetables before eating them.

*... eat or avoid particular foods such as apricots, mushrooms or chicken*

There is no evidence to show that eating or avoiding foods such as apricots, mushrooms and chicken provides any health benefit to women diagnosed with breast cancer.

## Summary

Healthy eating has significant health benefits for everyone, including women diagnosed with breast cancer. Combined with regular exercise, healthy eating can improve your overall health, make you feel better, and reduce your risk of developing other health conditions.

While it can be difficult to maintain a healthy diet after a breast cancer diagnosis, women tell us that eating well helps them feel more in control and is a way for them to improve their health proactively.

Remember that there is no 'perfect' diet – focus on small, achievable changes that you can make daily, and change only one or two eating habits at a time.

*Before my diagnosis my diet wasn't too bad, but still things can be improved. Now I include vegetables in all meals and eat more fruit. It works well and also benefits my husband. I take vitamin D and calcium supplements to keep my bones healthy. I enjoyed a drink now and then, which I have cut right back for health reasons. I re-joined the gym to jog and cycle. I love being back at the gym; it gives me some sense of achievement. I walk my dog every day for at least 30 minutes, which is nothing new, but keeps me active and my 'normal' routine. All in all I feel these changes are for the better and will be permanent. I hope I can keep them up alongside my treatment, but staying positive and being in the right headspace keeps me motivated to keep fighting. – Barbara*

## More information and support

### Healthy eating

#### Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)

- BCNA's free *My Journey Kit* includes information on eating well after a breast cancer diagnosis.
- BCNA's website provides information on eating well after a breast cancer diagnosis, including practical tips from women.

Visit [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au).

#### Cancer Council

- The *Understanding nutrition* booklet contains information and practical advice on good nutrition before, during and after cancer treatment.

Visit [www.cancerqld.org.au](http://www.cancerqld.org.au).

- The Cancer Council's *Nutrition and cancer* booklet provides helpful information on ways to manage common eating problems that may occur due to cancer or its treatment. It also includes information about support services which may be available to you.

Visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au) or phone 13 11 20 to see if your local Cancer Council can post you a copy.

- The *Nutrition and cancer: A guide for people with cancer, their families and friends* booklet provides information on eating well during treatment.

Visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au).

- Cancer Council's website provides practical information to help you maintain a healthy diet and weight after completing active treatment (surgery and/or chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy).

Visit [www.cancercouncil.com.au](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au).

## **Eat for Health**

The Eat for Health website provides up-to-date advice about the types and amounts of foods that we need to eat for health and wellbeing. The recommendations are based on the latest research. The website also includes calculators for you to estimate your personal energy needs and nutrient requirements.

Visit [www.eatforhealth.gov.au](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au).

## **Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA)**

The DAA website contains information on eating well, including recipes. It allows you to search for an accredited practising dietitian in your area.

Visit [www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au).

## **Nutrition Australia**

The Nutrition Australia website provides the latest nutrition-related news, information resources and recipes to help Australians maintain a healthy diet.

Visit [www.nutritionaustralia.org](http://www.nutritionaustralia.org).

## **The Department of Health and Ageing**

The Department of Health and Ageing website has information on exercise, nutrition and healthy eating, and maintaining a healthy weight, including a tool that calculates your BMI.

Visit [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au).

## **National Health and Medical Research Council**

The National Health and Medical Research Council website provides information about alcohol consumption for Australian adults. The website also includes a downloadable chart which explains how many standard drinks are contained in common servings of alcohol.

Visit [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au).

## Keeping active

### Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)

BCNA's *Exercise and breast cancer* booklet provides information on the benefits of exercise, the amount of exercise recommended for women diagnosed with breast cancer, practical strategies to stay motivated, and an exercise diary to keep track of your achievements. The booklet also contains information on diet and weight loss.

Visit [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au) or phone 1 800 500 258.

### Cancer Council Queensland

*Exercise after breast cancer surgery* is a fact sheet that explains gentle exercises that you can do to improve the movement of your arm and shoulder after breast cancer surgery. The fact sheet contains explanations and diagrams to help you understand how to do these exercises.

Visit [www.cancerqld.org.au](http://www.cancerqld.org.au) or phone 13 11 20 (from within Queensland) or (07) 3634 5100 from elsewhere.

### Cancer Council Western Australia

*Exercise for people living with cancer* is a comprehensive booklet that provides information on overcoming treatment-related side effects, and includes a week-long sample exercise program.

Visit [www.cancerwa.asn.au](http://www.cancerwa.asn.au) or phone 13 11 20 (from within Western Australia) or (08) 9212 4333 from elsewhere.

### YWCA Encore

YWCA Encore is a free eight-week program of gentle floor and pool based exercises for women diagnosed with breast cancer. The program also includes relaxation and information on topics such as nutrition. While the program is available to women who have been diagnosed at any time, it may be particularly helpful to assist women in managing the side effects of surgery and treatment, helping to restore strength, mobility, flexibility, confidence and general wellbeing. To find out if there is an Encore program in your area, visit [www.ywcaencore.org.au](http://www.ywcaencore.org.au) or phone 1 800 305 150.



## **Heart Foundation**

Heart Foundation Walking runs free walking groups around Australia for anyone who is interested in keeping active. Every walking group is different, and can vary in the number of people in the group, and the length and intensity of the walk.

To find out if there is a walking group in your area, visit [www.heartfoundation.org.au](http://www.heartfoundation.org.au) or phone 1300 362 787.

## **Complementary medicines**

### **Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)**

BCNA's website provides information on complementary medicines, including whether you should use them, how they are labelled, questions to ask your doctor, what to do if you experience side effects, and where to find more information.

Visit [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au).

### **Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre (USA)**

The Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre website provides evidence-based information about herbs, botanicals, supplements, and other complementary medicines.

Visit [www.mskcc.org](http://www.mskcc.org).

## Myth busting

### **Cancer Council iHeard**

The Cancer Council's iHeard website dispels the many myths and claims about cancer. It provides accurate, evidence-based answers to cancer questions submitted by the public.

If you have read or heard something you are unsure about, you can submit a cancer-related question to Cancer Council's iHeard website and they will respond with an evidence-based answer.

Visit [www.iheard.com.au](http://www.iheard.com.au).

## Mobile apps

### **Swap It Don't Stop It (free)**

Shows you how to make smarter food choices from swapping sweets for nuts, to getting more exercise in your day, along with ways to shop smart, save calories and how to join local exercise classes. You can track your progress and set alerts to remind you when it's time to make a swap.

### **Food labels with nutritional facts (free)**

Lets you keep track of the nutritional content of more than 7,000 foods. Use it to monitor your overall fat and calorie intake while eating out and at the supermarket.

### **Alcohol aware (\$1.99)**

Keeps track of the amount of alcoholic drinks you consume, and the effect the alcohol has on your waistline.

### **Calorie Counter & Diet Tracker by My Fitness Pal (free)**

Enter your age, gender, weight loss goals and this app will help you reach your weight loss goals in your specified time frame. It lets you keep a food diary and tracks the amount of exercise you do.

### **Kilojoule and Calorie Counter (free)**

Helps you keep track of the kilojoules and calories you consume. Allows you to upload a 'before' photo, measurements, and keep track of your weight.

### **Traffic Light Food Tracker (free)**

Compares the salt, fat, saturated fat content in packaged food products.

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National Health and Medical Research Council (2013) *Educator Guide*.

Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council.

# How you can support Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)

This booklet is one of many high quality resources that BCNA provides free to Australians affected by breast cancer. BCNA also offers support services and programs, connects people through their shared breast cancer experience, and advocates on behalf of Australians affected by, or at risk of, breast cancer to ensure their voices are heard.

We rely on the generosity of our supporters to continue our work. When the time is right for you, there are many ways you can support BCNA.

## Donate

Make a one-off donation, set up a regular monthly donation or leave a gift in your will.

## Give back while you work

Workplace giving brings employers and staff together to support a cause close to their hearts. It is an easy and convenient way to donate via pre-tax payroll deductions.

## Hold a fundraising event

A Pink Lady event can be anything from a simple afternoon tea to a fancy cocktail party. A Pink Sports Day is the perfect way for local sporting clubs to show their support.

## Participate in research

BCNA members interested in sharing their experiences and helping with breast cancer research can join BCNA's Review & Survey Group, which helps ensure the voices of Australians affected by breast cancer are heard.

## Attend a BCNA event

From our annual luncheon series to major events such as the Field of Women, our events bring people together to help make a difference.

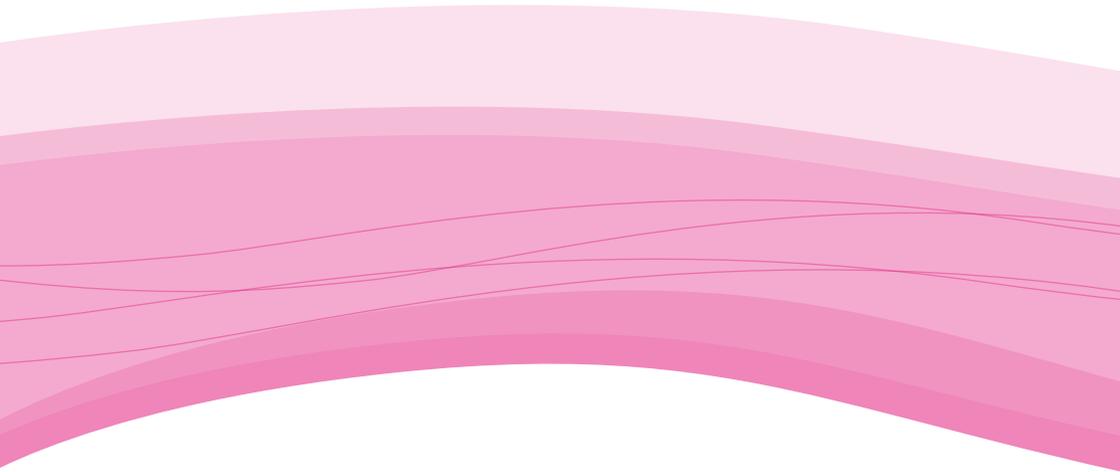
## Help us speak out

BCNA Consumer Representatives represent the broad views of Australians affected by breast cancer on national, state and local committees, working parties and at conferences. BCNA Community Liaisons speak about their personal experience with breast cancer and represent BCNA in their local communities.

## Set a personal goal

Thinking about a fun run, or taking a trip of a lifetime? We have some great ways you can take on a challenge while supporting BCNA.

To find out more about how you, your family and friends can help, phone **1800 500 258** or visit **[www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au)**.



Breast  
Cancer  
Network  
Australia



**Breast Cancer Network Australia**

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