



Get Creative with Soft Food

Sometimes you need softer food. It might be issues with your teeth, dry mouth or a medication side effect. Sometimes it is just for a few days, and other times it is a longer problem. You can still have flavorful and healthy food without a diet of soup, smoothies and commercial meal replacements. If you have a serious issue with chewing and swallowing, or dysphagia, contact your health care team. These suggestions are not designed for complex health issues.

The longer a food takes to digest, the longer you will feel full. Liquids leave your stomach quickly, and you feel hungry in an hour or so. Different nutrients take different amounts of time to digest. Carbohydrates are digested most quickly, followed by proteins and then fats. So, including protein and fat in a meal helps you feel full as well as providing nutrition. Fiber also helps slow down digestion; it is added to many of the commercial meal replacement products and can be included in regular meals too.

If it is hard to chew, try casseroles, hot dishes, stews, soups, hot cereals, puddings, custards, ice cream, smoothies and meal replacements. Canned fruits and vegetables and frozen vegetables cook up soft enough to eat. Meats and poultry can be marinated to make them more tender, and baking them with a sauce will be them more tender and moist.

If your mouth is dry, moist foods will be more comfortable to eat. Soups, stews and casseroles are logical choices. Adding a sauce to vegetables or meats is helpful; think beyond cheese sauce and gravy. Fruit salsas or applesauce taste great with pork and fish. Pour BBQ sauce over chicken or pork chops, cover the pan tightly with foil and bake for an hour at 350 degrees; you'll have tender meat with a tasty sauce. Mayonnaise and cream cheese can add moisture, but not a lot of nutrition value.

Other useful nutritious softer foods include:

Avocado—Mash two ripe avocados with the juice of one lime, and add some salt and pepper. Store with plastic wrap tightly against the guacamole to prevent air reaching it. The lime juice will delay browning for a few days. Use this spread instead of cheese on polenta or burgers or enjoy eating on its own.

Polenta—Polenta is a soft, cornmeal product that is a staple in northern Italy. It is available precooked and packaged in tubes in local grocery stores. All you need to do is slice it, heat it and eat it. Many people fry or toast it, but it is fine heated in the microwave to keep it soft. Top it with maple syrup and butter for a breakfast treat or a tomato sauce with frozen vegetables, cooked ground meat and Parmesan cheese for a full meal.

Eggs—Despite their higher cholesterol content, eggs contain the ideal mixture of proteins for humans and are the gold standard other proteins are measured against. Scrambled eggs, an omelet or frittata is a great way to get protein through a sore mouth.

Greek Yogurt—Greek yogurt is a condensed version of regular yogurt so it has a higher concentration of protein per bite. Eat whatever flavor appeals to you. It also makes a great sauce for cut-up fruits as it helps delay browning and adds some moisture.

Beans and hummus—drain and rinse canned legumes, then mash them with olive oil and seasonings to taste. This is a good high-fiber, high-protein side dish. Hummus is mashed chickpeas with tahini (ground sesame seeds), another great high-fiber protein source which can be tasty eaten by itself. Many hummus flavors are available in local groceries.

Cottage cheese—this popular ingredient is a great source of protein. It can be eaten plain with fruit or mixed into jello salads to add nutrition.

If you have trouble eating enough or are losing weight, here are some ideas to add both calories and nutrition. Add extras to every dish and beverage so you get maximum calories and nutrition per bite.

Supplement soups and casseroles

Add grated cheese on top

Mix in extra meat—for example, canned tuna in tomato soup, cooked hamburger in vegetable soup, extra meat in the hot dish

Dilute condensed soups with milk instead of water

Powerpack cooked cereals

Add a tablespoon or two of nut butter to a bowl of cereal

Add jelly instead of sugar

Mix in thawed frozen fruits

Add-in anywhere possible

Toppings on potatoes— use sour cream, cheese and chili

Applesauce or nut butters on pancakes

Make cocoa with a whole milk instead of water

Nut butters in pudding (chocolate peanut butter pudding, anyone?)

Article prepared by St. Anthony Park Area Seniors volunteer, Lisa Hoelscher, MPH, RDN, LD. Content in this column is evidence-based, general information for healthy adults, and not intended as medical advice. If you have a medical condition, check with your doctor before making diet changes.

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