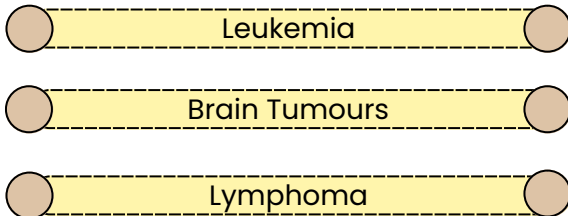


# Dexamethasone - Coping with mood changes and increase in appetite

## What is Dexamethasone (Dexa)?

Dexa is a steroid and may be prescribed for children with cancer who have:



It can be used for various reasons such as:

- To reduce inflammation
- Lower the body's immune response
- Avoid allergic reactions to treatments
- Reduce side effects of treatment

(Please consult your child's oncologist on the specific reason why your child is taking dexa)

Unfortunately, your child may experience some side effects while taking Dexa. Some common side effects may be **mood changes and an increase in appetite**

## Mood Changes



From our research, we know that during treatment children commonly experience fatigue, worry/anxiety, sadness and boredom\*. Common side effects of Dexa could aggravate these problems further as Dexa can affect the mood causing mood swings, irritability, anxiety and temper tantrums.

## **EXAMPLES:**



It can be scary to see your child act differently from how he/she is usually, especially during treatment. It's important to remind yourself that the change is likely due to the medication and will be temporary. Your child may also not be aware of the mood changes and may find it difficult to control their mood.

You can use some of our strategies in:

**Theme 1, Issue 2: Helping Your Child to Cope with Their Feelings\***

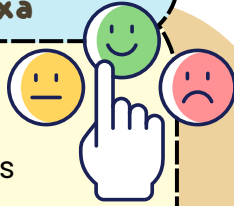


## **Here are some additional strategies you may like to implement to help your child when they experience mood difficulties:**

**01**

### **Normalise mood changes with Dexa**

It may be helpful to explain to your child that their mood changes could be related to Dexa and it is not their fault. You can prepare him/her in advance by telling him/her that the medicine is going to help but sometimes it can also make him/ her feel grumpy and sad.



**02**

### **Reward good behaviour**



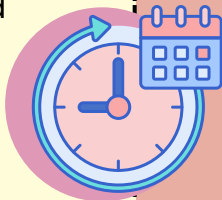
If you see your child doing something well, give him/ her specific praise (e.g., "Thank you for putting your toys back in the box") or rewards for a good behaviour (e.g., hugs, screen time, games).

Try to avoid punishment or scolding your child and speak calmly if he/ she does something wrong. Allow some time for your child to calm down.

**03**

### **Stick to routines and be consistent when giving instructions**

- Keep to routines that your child is familiar with so their daily schedule is predictable and there are no surprises.
- Ensure there is time for rest through providing regular breaks for them.
- Provide consistent instructions so your child does not get confused or think the rules can be bent easily.



**04**

### **Speak to siblings**

- Siblings may not understand what is going on when your child's mood changes easily. It is helpful to speak to the siblings and explain that the medicine may cause some changes to their brother or sister's mood.
- If it is difficult to manage conflicts during this period, it may be helpful to separate them temporarily.



\* You can find out more about our research and access past editions of our newsletter on our website by scanning the QR code.



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## **How can Dexamethasone (Dexa) affect your appetite?**

- Dexa can mimic the action of cortisol, a stress hormone, which can lead to increase in the feeling of hunger. Dexa can also cause weight gain, in the form of increased fat deposition instead of muscle mass (Akalestou et al., 2020), as well as water retention due to changes in electrolyte balance. Fat deposition from steroids tend to build up especially on the face and abdomen.

### **Eating tips to cope with increased appetite**

#### **TIP #1**

#### **CHOOSE TUMMY-FILLING FOODS THAT ARE LOWER IN CALORIES.**



- Foods that are high in fibre can help your child stay fuller for longer and prevent unwanted weight gain.
- Fibre can also help to prevent constipation.

#### **EXAMPLES**



Fruits



Vegetables



Wholegrain products

#### **TIP #2**

#### **INCLUDE A SOURCE OF LEAN PROTEIN AT EACH MEAL**



- Proteins helps the body grow, build muscles, heal wounds and support a healthy, immune system.
- Proteins can reduce the level of the hunger hormone (Ghrelin), and help to keep your child full for longer.

#### **TIP #3**

#### **CHOOSE LOWER FAT OPTIONS AND LOW-FAT COOKING METHODS**

- Fats help your child's body store energy, insulate body tissues, and carry fat-soluble vitamins throughout the bloodstream.
- Not all fats are created equal. Unsaturated fats, found in oily fish, nuts, avocados, can improve cardiovascular health, whereas saturated and trans fat, found in fried foods, fatty meat and poultry skin, increases risk of cardiovascular disease in future.
- Nonetheless, both types of fats, if consumed in large quantities, will contribute to weight gain as they are dense in calories.
- To prevent unwanted weight gain, it is important to opt for low-fat options.



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## Here are some ideas on how to incorporate these strategies into your child's diet at main meals and snack time.

### MAIN MEAL IDEAS

Include an age appropriate portion of lean protein

e.g. tofu, fish, egg, chickpea and lentils



Add vegetables to bulk up the meal portions

Include vegetables in sauces/ baking  
e.g. adding carrots in muffins/ bread/ sauces, cauliflower, broccoli and carrots in nuggets, adding cauliflower into mashed potato/ as rice, vegetable dip



### USE LOW FAT COOKING METHODS

**Baking**



**Boiling**



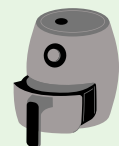
**Steaming**



**Grilling**



**Air Frying**



### TRIM OFF FAT AND SKINS FROM MEAT BEFORE COOKING

### HIGH FIBRE, LOW CALORIE SNACK IDEAS



Soy bean curd  
(no/ less sugar)



Freeze dried fruit  
snacks

Fresh, fibrous fruits  
e.g. apples, pear,  
guava



Vegetable sticks/  
soup

Rice crackers



Oats

Wholemeal/  
oat biscuits



Low-fat yoghurt

Seaweed





## CHOOSE WATER AS A MAIN DRINK

- Water helps suppress hunger
- When your child feels hungry, offer water/ fluids first before food as it is possible for the body to mistake thirst as hunger.



- Avoid sweetened drinks (e.g. soft drinks, bubble tea) or juices as it can lead to extra calorie intake

- Opt for zero calorie drinks (e.g. fruit infused water, boiled water, unsweetened home-brewed drinks such as chrysanthemum tea, barley water, brown rice tea, floral tea)



- Choose drinks with the healthier choice symbols

**Tip:** Look for beverages labelled with Nutri-grade A or B or Healthier Choice Symbol



## AVOID HIGH SODIUM/SALTY FOODS

- Excessive salt intake can cause body to retain water and contribute to weight gain

### HIGH SODIUM FOODS TO **AVOID** INCLUDE:

Canned foods  
(e.g. soups, sardines, meat)

Processed and cured meats  
(e.g. ham, salami, meat pate)

Salad dressings  
(e.g. Caesar dressing, ranch dressing, thousand island dressing)

**Alternative:** lemon juice, vinaigrette dressing



Sauces  
(e.g. tomato sauce, soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce)

**Alternative:** Use natural flavours of food, Use herbs and spices



### EXAMPLES OF USING HERBS AND SPICES TO FLAVOR MEAT, POULTRY AND SOUPS

Garlic powder



Ginger



Parsley



Paprika



# Lifestyle changes to cope with increased appetite



## HAVE A SCHEDULE FOR MEALS AND SNACKS

Encourage your child to wait at least 20 mins after eating before asking for more to help them recognise they are full.  
Space meals at least 2 to 3 hours apart.

During non-meal times, engage your child in some activities when they feel hungry.

### EXAMPLES

Reading



Colouring



Doing puzzles



Serve your child low calorie snacks/ foods in between meals.



## DURING THE MEAL, PRACTICE MINDFUL EATING

Spend at least 15 to 20 minutes for a meal.

Remind your child to chew thoroughly. Increasing the number of bites has been shown to increase gut hormone release and promote satiety/ fullness.



Set your utensils down in between bites of food to help your child eat more slowly and savour each bite.

Eliminate distractions (e.g. watching TV/ using mobile phones) as distractions might cause the body to not recognise that it is full.



Drink water before and after a meal to increase satiety.



## STAY ACTIVE

- Keep your child's mind off eating by incorporating short exercises/ games throughout the day.

### EXAMPLES

Dancing to music

Stretching exercises

Bowling

Hide and seek

egg and spoon race

- Physical activity can help to reduce hunger hormone (ghrelin) levels, while also burning off calories to lower risk of excess weight gain.



## HAVE SUFFICIENT SLEEP

Lack of sleep can:

- Increase subjective feels of hunger, appetite, and food cravings
- Cause an elevation in hunger hormone (Ghrelin).



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