

Eating Well with Scleroderma

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Q: I've read that eating chicken, beef and lamb increases collagen in your body. Should scleroderma patients avoid foods that are high in collagen?

A: The simple answer is no. A person with scleroderma does not need to avoid foods high in collagen.

Collagen is tough connective tissue often found in various cuts of meat, specifically beef, lamb and pork, which tends to make the meat tougher and harder to chew. A common cooking method for such cuts of meat is at a lower temperature (around 225 degrees F) for a longer time, which tenderizes the meat by breaking the collagen down into an easily digested soft gelatin. The body then uses the resulting amino acids, such as lysine and proline, to rebuild and repair skin, muscle and other connective tissue. Even though these amino acids are essential for collagen production, there is no research to support that eating foods rich in lysine and proline results in an overproduction of collagen, which is characteristic of scleroderma.

Q: What foods should I avoid when taking my meds?

This is a very important yet often misunderstood topic. A food-drug interaction occurs when a food, or one of its components, interferes with the way a drug is absorbed, distributed, metabolized or excreted by the body. This could result in too little or too much of a given medication circulating in the body at one time, which could have dangerous consequences.

Fortunately, the "foods to avoid" list is short for medications typically prescribed for managing scleroderma symptoms:

- **Grapefruit juice and Seville oranges** contain a compound that interferes with the absorption of many different medications. Therefore, scleroderma patients who take multiple medications (especially nifedipine (Procardia[®]), amlodipine (Norvasc[®]), and other calcium-channel blockers; losartan (Cozaar[®]); and/or cyclosporine), should completely eliminate grapefruit products and Seville oranges from their diets. This interacting compound **is not found** in other citrus fruits such as regular oranges, lemons and limes.
- **Dairy products, such as milk and yogurt**, which are naturally high in calcium, as well as supplements containing **calcium, aluminum, magnesium, iron or zinc** decrease the absorption of various antibiotics, specifically minocycline and other tetracycline derivatives. Therefore, it is suggested you take this medication two hours before or at least four hours after eating dairy products or taking a vitamin/mineral supplement containing any of the minerals listed above.

- **Black licorice** also has been found to interfere with many medications. It is wise for scleroderma patients on multiple medications to avoid eating natural licorice.

Q: What vitamins, if any, should a scleroderma patient incorporate into their diet?

The best way to meet one's nutritional needs is through a balanced diet containing a wide variety of foods. However, a daily multivitamin/mineral supplement containing 15 mg zinc; 10-18 mg iron; vitamins A, D, E, and K; folate; and B-12 can help prevent common nutrient deficiencies found in scleroderma patients with extensive gastrointestinal involvement. Taking additional calcium with vitamin D is advisable as well. Excessive intake of any one vitamin or mineral should be avoided unless a specific nutrient deficiency has been identified by way of a blood test.

Q: I am a 53-year-old male who has GI complications secondary to my scleroderma. I have been losing a lot of weight because I find it so painful to eat. I've tried drinks like *Ensure*[®] and other nutritional supplements, but what are some other products or tips that could increase my caloric intake?

It is important to first address your painful GI symptoms. Ideally, you should be evaluated by an ENT or gastroenterologist to assess for stricture (narrowing) of your throat and food pipe and possibly receive other recommended tests. If they find no structural problems, then you can try making dietary changes.

Scientific research has found that many painful GI symptoms are aggravated by foods containing wheat, dairy and/or fermentable sugars. The low-FODMAP diet was developed specifically for people with extreme GI distress, which eliminates difficult to digest gluten, lactose and fermentable carbohydrates. Limiting your food choices to those your GI tract tolerates will make it easier to eat more and gain weight.

Weight gain is difficult when you are not eating much; therefore, it is essential to add as many calories as possible to the foods you do eat, such as:

- Liberally add sources of healthy fats to your diet such as olive, canola and peanut oils; nuts, seeds and nut butters; avocado; fatty fish; and oil-based salad dressings.
- Make homemade smoothies using fruit, yogurt, 2-percent milk, 1 to 2 tablespoons of peanut butter, 1 to 3 teaspoons canola oil, *Carnation Instant Breakfast* and/or whey protein powder
- Eat every two hours, even if not particularly hungry.

Consider making an appointment with a registered dietitian to ensure that you meet your nutritional needs and maximize your calorie intake from tolerated foods. To find a registered dietitian in your area, visit www.eatright.org.

For even more details on building a healthy, balanced diet, contact the Scleroderma Foundation for a copy of the "Eating Well with Scleroderma" brochure by Linda Kaminski and Dr. Dinesh Khanna.

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