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dear dietitian

Stoma and B12 Deficiency

Maintaining optimal nutrition is crucial for people with a stoma. One essential nutrient to focus on is vitamin B12. Since the body's ability to absorb B12 may be compromised after stoma surgery (depending on the type of surgery and how much bowel is left), it is important to ensure an adequate intake of vitamin and mineral levels.

What is B12 deficiency?

A B12 deficiency occurs when your body doesn't have enough vitamin B12 to function properly. Vitamin B12 is an essential nutrient that plays a crucial role in various bodily functions, including nerve function, red blood cell production, and DNA synthesis. When you have a deficiency, it can lead to various health issues and symptoms. There are different causes of vitamin B12 deficiency. To establish the cause and treatment, blood tests will be needed. If levels are low, normally a supplement will be trialled, and levels monitored. If levels increase, diet may be the likely cause. You may be advised to make some dietary changes or to take a supplement/injection.

What are the symptoms of B12 deficiency?

- » Fatigue, weakness and a feeling of low energy – this may result in finding it difficult to perform daily activities.
- » Nerve problems such as tingling/ numbness in hands and feet.
- » Digestive issues such as reduced appetite and weight loss.
- » Anaemia (megaloblastic) which causes pale skin, shortness of breath and dizziness.
- » Neurological symptoms such as memory loss and 'brain fog'.



Individuals with a stoma, especially those who have undergone surgical removal of the terminal ileum (the last part of the small intestine), are at an increased risk of developing a B12 deficiency due to the absorption site of B12 being in the ileum. If you experience these symptoms or suspect a B12 deficiency, it is important to consult with your healthcare professional for a diagnosis. They can perform a blood test to measure your B12 levels and determine the appropriate treatment, which may include dietary changes or B12 supplementation.



How to increase B12 in your diet

- » Meat (chicken, beef, lamb, duck, pork, liver pate).
- » Fish such as cod, tuna, sardines, salmon, mackerel.
- » Milk and dairy such as eggs, cheese, milk.

See the table below for further examples.

Food sources	Serving size (g)	Vit B12 (mcg)
Liver (Beef)	85	71.2
Trout	85	4.2
Salmon	85	3.8
Tuna	85	1.9
Beef (Lean cuts)	85	1.2
Chicken	85	0.2
Eggs	50	0.6
Milk (Cow's milk)	240	1.2
Yogurt (Plain)	245	1.4
Cheese	28	0.4



Vegetarians and vegans, due to their dietary choices, are at an increased risk of developing a vitamin B12 deficiency. Vitamin B12 is primarily found in animal-derived foods, making it challenging for people following a strict vegetarian or vegan diet to obtain sufficient amounts. Plant based sources are generally low in vitamin B12. If you do follow these diets it is important to include fortified plant based milk (soy, almond oat), fortified breakfast cereals, and fortified nutritional yeast in your diet and consider supplementation with B12 tablets depending on the level of dietary exclusion. You should also check the labels of products to ensure they are fortified too!



Treatment and monitoring

If levels remain low, you might have difficulties absorbing vitamin B12. You should then be offered a course of vitamin B12 injections to build up levels and have a follow up blood test. It is likely this treatment may be lifelong and will require frequent blood tests.

Conclusion

Maintaining adequate vitamin B12 levels is crucial for individuals with a stoma. By understanding the challenges associated with B12 absorption, identifying dietary sources, and considering appropriate supplementation options, you can optimise your B12 intake and prevent deficiencies. Regular monitoring of B12 levels and close collaboration with healthcare professionals are essential for long-term well-being.

If you are concerned about any symptoms you may be experiencing or any issues with your stoma, reach out to your dietitian for support and/or contact us at pooja@citydietitians.co.uk.

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