



# **NUTRITIONAL NEEDS IN SCLERODERMA**

---

The purpose of this booklet is to assist people with nutritional concerns relating to scleroderma and to also ensure people continue to enjoy food, sometimes with dietary modifications.



scleroderma **australia**





## Swallowing

Overproduction of collagen due to scleroderma can cause thickening and scarring of tissue. This can result in the slow movement of food through the digestive tract, which is known as dysmotility. Difficulty in swallowing, or dysphagia, is also common in scleroderma.

Another common symptom of scleroderma is dry mouth, or xerostomia. Reduced saliva means that chewed food is less moist, making it harder to swallow. A speech pathologist may be able to help you to assess and choose the right texture of foods for your specific case.

If you experience any of these issues, these tips may help:

- Eat slowly. Allow more time for eating, due to slower movement of food passing through.
- Chew well. Smaller pieces of food are easier for your body to digest properly.
- Try soft or pureed foods such as mashed potatoes, soup, pureed fruit and casseroles. A slow cooker can be your new best friend!
- Some people may experience problems with dry foods such as bread or biscuits. You can dip them into liquids such as broth or spread some butter to moisten them.
- Drink small amounts of fluids frequently and between bites to help the food go down.
- Blending or mincing foods such as meats or vegetables can make them easier to digest. Add seasonings, sauces, or butter to improve the flavour and texture.

## The Oesophagus

A common condition that occurs in patients with scleroderma is GORD. GORD, or Gastro-Oesophageal Reflux Disease, can cause irritation in the oesophagus, the pipe that connects the throat to the stomach. This condition is commonly known as 'acid reflux'.

In GORD, the ring of muscle known as the lower oesophageal sphincter becomes damaged or weakened. This allows stomach acid to rise into the oesophagus, causing irritation. There are liquid supplements available for people with swallowing difficulties.

To reduce acid reflux, consider the following:

- Decrease or eliminate the intake of alcohol, fizzy drinks and caffeine, which are common triggers for acid reflux.
- Possible triggers for acid reflux include citrus fruit, tomatoes, tomato products, spicy foods and onions. If you notice your symptoms flaring after consuming these, reduce or eliminate them.
- Fatty and oily foods are another common trigger for reflux. This is because they can relax the lower oesophageal sphincter. Keep your portions of good fats such as olive oil and avocado on the smaller side, avoid high-fat and processed.
- Remain upright for 1 to 2 hours after eating. Avoid eating just before lying down, napping, or going to bed at night.
- Eat smaller, more frequent meals (4- 6 small meals per day).

- Raise the head of your bed by a small amount (~10cm).
- Keep a food diary to establish the foods that cause symptoms. Show this list to your dietitian or nutritionist, so they can help you to adjust your diet.

## Tips for Acid Reflux



Don't smoke



Avoid spicy food



Exercise regularly



Avoid trigger foods



Don't view reflux in isolation



Sleep on your left side & get enough sleep!



Stop eating 3+ hours before bedtime




Eat mindfully



Raise the head of the bed 6-8 inches

## The Stomach and Intestines

Absorption of nutrients from the gut is compromised in scleroderma due to a number of reasons. Supplementary nutrients may be of use, particularly when there are known digestive issues.



Including foods that contain good bacteria or probiotics may be beneficial. Some studies have suggested that specific strains of probiotics may help to relieve digestive symptoms for people with scleroderma.

It's important to start slowly when adding probiotic foods and supplements, as some digestive conditions may be exacerbated with probiotic use. If this occurs, seek professional advice from a qualified health practitioner.


Diarrhoea, constipation, bloating and other digestive problems can be unpleasant symptoms of scleroderma.

Diarrhoea can be caused by medication use, malabsorption of foods, dysmotility and imbalances in gut flora. Foods that have soluble fibre may help with diarrhoea. Soluble fibre sources include bananas, apples, oats and prunes.

Avoid highly processed and refined foods, as these may trigger diarrhoea. If severe diarrhoea or constipation persists, seek professional help.

Constipation can be caused by medication use, malabsorption of foods, dysmotility and imbalances in gut flora. Dehydration and insufficient physical activity can also contribute to constipation.

If you experience constipation, these tips may help:

- Aim for a fluid intake of 1.5 to 2 litres per day, depending on your body weight and needs. This can include broths, smoothies, herbal teas and nutritional supplements. If you have Raynaud's, allow your beverages to come to room temperature, particularly in cold weather.
- 

- Gentle exercise is beneficial for digestion and movement of the bowels. Going for a short walk is a good place to start, but even incidental activity such as light housework or collecting the mail counts.
- Include fibre-rich foods in your diet. Aim for 20 to 35 grams/day.

Be sure to add fibre gradually into the diet. You may experience digestive symptoms such as bloating, colicky pain and gas if you increase fibre too quickly. Dietary fibre sources include fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds, beans, legumes and wholegrains.

## Bone Health

To maintain strong, healthy bones, you need a variety of nutrients including calcium, magnesium and vitamin D.

### Calcium

Calcium is needed for strong bones and healthy teeth. When you don't have enough calcium, your body takes what it needs from your bones for other essential processes.

If you use steroids such as prednisolone, your calcium levels can become depleted and lead to osteopenia and osteoporosis. This is why it's essential to consume calcium through the diet, and supplement if needed.

Dairy products are rich in calcium, but many people are intolerant to dairy foods and/or lactose. You can also find calcium in bone-based broths, green leafy vegetables, nuts and tahini (sesame seed paste). Fish with soft bones such as tinned salmon and sardines are another good source of calcium.



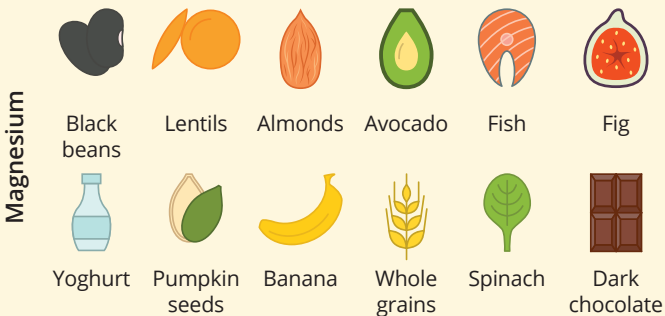


## Magnesium

Magnesium works alongside calcium to build bone density. Many Australians don't consume enough magnesium to meet their needs. This is particularly concerning for those with scleroderma, as some symptoms such as diarrhoea and kidney issues can lead to further depletion of magnesium.

Dietary sources of magnesium include nuts, seeds, green leafy vegetables and dark chocolate.

Many people with scleroderma could benefit from a magnesium supplement. It's best to seek advice from a qualified nutrition professional, as some forms of magnesium are poorly absorbed and can cause digestive symptoms such as diarrhoea.



## Vitamin D

Vitamin D is essential for healthy bones. It promotes the absorption of calcium from food and supplements, as well as helping to build and maintain bone density.

Research has found that low vitamin D levels are associated with poor outcomes in scleroderma. Unfortunately, many patients with scleroderma are deficient in vitamin D.

Unlike other nutrients, our main source of vitamin D is sunlight. If you live in one of the southern states or you spend the majority of your time inside, you have a higher risk of deficiency.

Vitamin D supplementation is often warranted in scleroderma. The right dose will depend on your specific requirements, so seek professional guidance.

Vitamin D



Egg



Canned fish



Milk



Mushroom



Fish




Yoghurt

## Aim For A Healthy Weight

Unintentional weight loss can be a problem in scleroderma due to malabsorption, difficulties with eating and swallowing and digestive issues.

To avoid any unintentional weight loss, give these tips a try:


- Eat smaller meals frequently – aim for 4-6 mini-meals

- 
- Extra calories can be easier to consume in liquid form. Smoothies are a great option for adding calories and protein.
  - Add calorie boosters such as nut butters, cheese, Greek yoghurt, avocado, eggs, olive oil, coconut milk and oily fish to your meals and snacks.
  - Seek advice from a qualified nutritionist or dietitian. They can give you advice about healthy higher calorie options and nutritional supplements that may be beneficial.

The goal is always to keep you well nourished.


If you have gut symptoms and weight loss that is not well explained, speak with your doctor about the need for investigations.

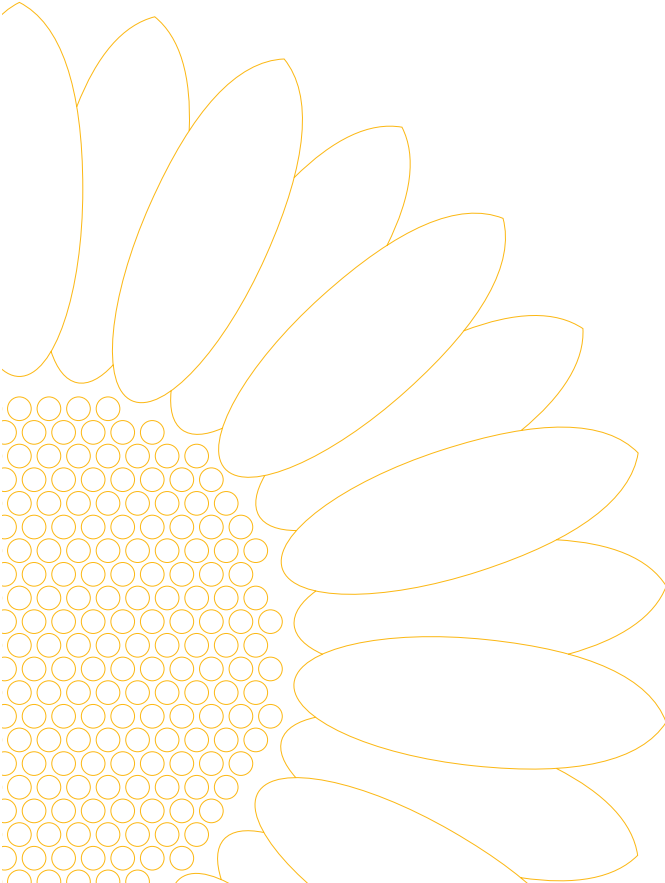
## Conclusion



Navigating nutrition with scleroderma can be challenging. However, making small adjustments over time can add up to big improvements. Going slowly with dietary changes will often be more beneficial than changing everything at once.

If you are concerned about your food intake or need tailored advice, you should make an appointment with a qualified nutritionist or dietitian who has experience with scleroderma.





*The information provided in this brochure is general in nature. It is not intended as a substitute for tailored dietary advice from a qualified nutrition professional.*

**Author** Samantha Gemmell - Nutritionist (BHSc)  
Barbara Gemmell - Scleroderma Nurse

**Scleroderma Australia Inc.** PO Box 57, Melton VIC 3337  
02 9990 5159 | [hello@sclerodermaaustralia.com.au](mailto:hello@sclerodermaaustralia.com.au)

   September 2021

[SCLERODERMAAUSTRALIA.COM.AU](http://SCLERODERMAAUSTRALIA.COM.AU)