

The Elemental Diet

The elemental diet is a nutritionally complete liquid diet in which the nutrients are broken down into their simplest format for ease of absorption to create a hypo-allergenic formula. A true elemental diet has zero-fibre and allows the digestive system to take a break from digesting food.

Potential Uses

This diet is recommended for IBD patients, with digestive and malabsorption issues, in whom a normal diet may exacerbate symptoms. The elemental diet allows the digestive system to rest and also helps to replace nutrients that may be missing due to malabsorption. Studies show that in Crohn's disease, 80% to 100% of compliant patients can achieve symptom remission within 2 to 3 weeks.¹

The elemental diet can also be used as a treatment for Small Intestinal Bacterial Overgrowth (SIBO), and dysbiosis (which is often also present in IBD patients and may be a cause of symptom exacerbation). The diet helps to resolve SIBO symptoms as it is designed to be absorbed very quickly in the upper GI tract, so starves the excessive bacteria that live in the intestine and can cause the symptoms.

The elemental diet is hypoallergenic, which means that it can be used to effectively remove foods which trigger inflammation, so can be used safely by those with multiple food sensitivities or allergies.

By the end of the elemental diet, many people experience improvement in gastrointestinal symptoms (reduced bloating, diarrhoea, constipation, abdominal pain etc), and other symptoms such as fatigue, joint pain, headaches, brain fog etc. may also improve (due to the re-balancing of the gut microflora).

However, elemental diets can occasionally cause gastrointestinal distress and other side effects; so medical supervision is advised. We recommend that you discuss this with your gastroenterologist or Functional Medicine doctor before starting the diet.

Elemental Diet and its Components

An Elemental Diet consists of:

- Amino acids: The building blocks that form protein molecules
- Fat: Usually as medium-chain triglycerides (as these are easily absorbed)
- Carbohydrates: As glucose or maltodextrin
- Micronutrients: Vitamins, minerals and electrolytes

Pre-Made Formulas

There are various premade elemental formulas but the two that we recommend and are available in the UK are Absorb Plus and the Physicians' Elemental Diet (Dextrose Free):

Absorb Plus is available here:

<https://listentoyourgut.co.uk/collections/elemental-shakes>

Physicians Elemental diet is here:

<https://www.spectrumsupplements.co.uk/supplement/physicians-elemental-diet-dextrose-free-1260-grams/>

Your nutritional therapist will be able to help you choose the product most appropriate for you.

Homemade Elemental Diet Option

As a cheaper option, you can make a homemade elemental diet. However, the taste is significantly less palatable than the pre-made versions.

Dr Alison Siebecker has suggested two options; low carbohydrate and higher fat option or high carbohydrate and lower fat option. Your nutritional therapist will advise which option is suitable for you.

Homemade Elemental Diet Recipes

Please note: With the homemade elemental diet, you may need to take additional Vitamin and mineral supplements as recommended by your doctor or nutritional therapist.

Transition Diet/ Reintroduction of Solid food

It is important to follow a slow and careful reintroduction of food following the elemental diet to avoid gastrointestinal upset, prevent bloating and support motility:

Day 1 & 2 - transition from the elemental diet to solid foods

- *How:* All foods need to be peeled, well-cooked and pureed on day 1 and day 2.
- *Avoid:* Fibre-rich foods and inflammatory foods such as grains, dairy and eggs.
- *Include:* For IBD patients often the Elemental diet is followed by the [Functional Elimination diet](#) and therefore your nutritional therapist will instruct you on which foods to include first but normally you would be asked to start with low-fibre vegetables such as *courgette with the seeds removed, parsnips, pumpkin etc*
- *Quantity:* Start with a dessertspoon full and a few hours later another dessertspoon full. Then another hour or two - two dessertspoons full etc. Build up slowly and once portion sizes are larger, do have breaks of a few hours between meals.

At the same time to keep your calories up continue with the elemental drink.

Day 3 onwards

On day 3 you can try to add higher fibre foods (such as celeriac) and also you can then move to add in some protein such as poached white fish and stewed chicken

If tolerated, you can follow the Functional Elimination Diet as per your doctor's advice but make sure that the vegetables and fruits are still cooked and peeled. Think about how easy a food would be to digest. For example, a steak / leafy veg is harder than pureed or stewed / slow cooked meat and veg. parsnips – so gradually build up to foods that are more difficult to digest. For any questions ask your nutritional therapist.

Frequently Asked Questions

Will I lose weight when on the elemental diet?

You shouldn't lose weight and if underweight elemental can help you gain weight. If, however losing weight is one of your goals you should discuss this with your nutritional therapist to adjust the dosage accordingly.

Will I be able to work?

This is really personal, some people have great energy on the elemental diet and can work, while others get fatigued and cannot work.

If you feel tired on the elemental it may be because you are not having enough or you are not sipping it through the day which helps stabilise blood sugar levels and curb off cravings – let your nutritional therapist know at any time if you struggle with anything.

Bear in mind that when on an elemental diet your body is healing and healing takes a lot of energy, therefore if you use that energy to go to work or do any other daily activities you are taking away from energy that could be used for healing. That as a result can lead to more pronounced symptoms of fatigue.

What if I really feel like eating solid foods?

Although the best results have been observed with a fully elemental diet, there is also clinical success with having occasionally (once every 5 days) skinless chicken or a lean beef steak in the elemental diet. However, make sure that you chew the food thoroughly before swallowing it for better digestion.

The elemental diet is unpalatable which makes it hard to have it, what can I do?

There are different flavours of premade elemental diet some sweetened and some unsweetened. We favour the unsweetened options to maintain blood sugar control and avoid exacerbation of yeast overgrowth. However, if palatability compromises your compliance, speak to your nutritional therapist to recommend another option.

Alternatively, you can add a few drops of pure liquid stevia such as [Stevia Liquid Pure by NKDLiving](#) to add some sweetness.

Some people prefer the diet blended with ice as it improves the texture.

Will I experience any adverse symptoms?

Symptoms can vary, but people on elemental can get both intestinal and other symptoms.

The most common symptoms include fatigue and headache. However, occasionally, in the first few days, you may get flu-like symptoms such as body aches, chills and upper-respiratory symptoms. This is normal and it is the immune system's reaction to the release of toxins as the unfriendly bacteria in the gut die.

Finally, sometimes the first few days you may get to experience existing or past IBD symptoms. However, normally, this doesn't last more than 3 days.

References

1. Hunter J. Elemental diet and the nutritional treatment of Crohn's disease. *Gastroenterol Hepatol Bed Bench*. 2015 Winter;8(1):4-5. PMID: 25584170; PMCID: PMC4285926.