

Healthy Nutrition

Eating a healthy diet is one of the most important things you can do for your body. A balanced diet can help you maintain a healthy weight, avoid disease, and feel more energetic. The following information will help you understand the basics of a healthy diet. It will also give you some ways to make better nutrition a part of your everyday life.

Healthy eating basics

Healthy eating involves both choosing healthy foods and eating them in amounts that are right for you. Even if you eat a balanced diet, you may develop a weight problem if you eat too much—that is, if the food you eat contains more calories than your body needs. Here are two ways to avoid overdoing it:

Familiarize yourself with how many calories you need each day. The number you need depends on factors such as age, gender, height, activity level, and overall health. Find out more about calories and other key facts on eating a healthy diet at the website of the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO).

Fill half your plate with fruit and vegetables. Fresh fruit and vegetables generally have fewer calories per portion than other foods. Eating more of them can help you limit calories without counting calories rigidly.

One easy way to do this is to fill half of your plate at each meal with fruit and vegetables and the other half with grains, preferably whole grains, and lean protein.

Guidelines for healthy eating all through life

Here are some guidelines about what to eat:

Avoid saturated fats and trans fats. Everyone needs to eat some fats. Fats help your body absorb necessary vitamins and nutrients. But it's important to choose fats sensibly. Saturated fats can cause a build-up of blood cholesterol, which can lead to heart disease, and should be eaten sparingly.

Saturated fats are typically solid at room temperature and found in many high-fat dairy products, like cheese, whole milk, cream, butter, and ice cream. Saturated fat is also found in fatty meats, the skin and fat of poultry, lard, and some oils, including palm, palm kernel, and coconut.

Partially hydrogenated oil contains trans fats; it is called "partially hydrogenated" due to its chemical make-up. Common sources of trans fats are vegetable suet, margarine, and commercially prepared baked goods, snack food, and fried food. Hydrogenated fats can increase cholesterol and have been phased out of almost all supermarkets own-brand food.

Foods containing cholesterol. Food that is high in dietary cholesterol, such as kidneys, eggs and prawns are less likely to increase your blood cholesterol than those that are high in saturated

fat. If your health care provider recommends changing your diet to reduce blood cholesterol then avoiding foods high in saturated fat and increasing the amount of fruit, vegetables, and fibre you eat is the way forward.

Eat unsaturated fats. Foods with unsaturated fats do not raise blood cholesterol. These include:

- vegetable, olive, sunflower, rapeseed, and peanut oils
- nuts
- avocados
- fatty fish, like salmon or mackerel

Choose drinks and foods that are low in sugar. Sugars occur naturally in many foods, and your body can break down and use these types of sugars for energy. Sugar (in a variety of forms) is also added to many foods and beverages. This added sugar provides little, if any, nutritional value and can cause weight gain and tooth decay.

These foods have added sugar and should be consumed in moderation:

- fizzy drinks
- sweets
- biscuits, cakes, and pies
- fruit drinks, like squash
- dairy desserts, like ice cream, and sweetened yoghurts

Eat foods that are low in salt. You can reduce your chance of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease by reducing the amount of salt you eat.

Salt is mainly found in processed and prepared foods, so try to eat fresh food, or look for products marked "low salt" or "reduced-salt." If the salt content is measured as sodium on the label, then you need to multiply that number by 2.5 for the equivalent in salt.

[The World Health Organization](#) says we eat too much salt—on average 9–12 grams per day—this is over twice the recommended daily allowance.

Visit the [WHO page on salt reduction](#) for more details. Remember that your taste for salt is not fixed. If you reduce what you add to your food you might miss the saltier tastes at first, but your taste for salt will decrease after a period.

Limit your intake of alcohol. Alcoholic drinks supply calories but few nutrients. Alcohol also alters judgment and can lead to alcohol dependency and other health problems. The [WHO](#) says to avoid drinking alcohol and says there are no "safe" drinking limits—just lower risk if you drink less. They have no guidance and say, "the evidence shows that the ideal situation for health is to not drink at all."

Get most of your calories from whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, low-fat or non-fat dairy products, and lean meats or meat substitutes.

Before you use these guidelines for yourself or members of your family, consult your health care provider. Your age, activity level, health, and other factors will determine how many servings you should have from each food group.

More tips for healthy nutrition

Watch your portion sizes. Many restaurant meals—and even meals you cook at home—may be up to three or four times the size of an average portion.

Get to know what a serving size *really* is and limit yourself to that amount of food. Many things sold in an individual package—a can of fizzy drink or a 12-ounce steak—provide two or more servings.

When you're eating at a restaurant, consider ordering a half portion, sharing your meal, or asking to have some of it wrapped up to take home.

Eat more whole-grain foods. Whole grains (oatmeal, whole wheat, brown rice, whole oats, whole rye) have more vitamins, minerals, fibre, and other nutrients than refined grains, like those found in white rice or pasta.

Drink water instead of fizzy drinks or juice. Water has zero calories and doesn't contain sugar, both of which are in carbonated drinks and juice.

Aim for a variety of fruit and vegetables every day. Eat raw vegetables or fruit, like carrots or an apple, for a snack or eat fruit for dessert.

Eat breakfast. Eating breakfast can help you control hunger throughout the day. Try porridge and a piece of fruit or some yogurt with berries.

Switch to low-fat versions of some foods. Use low-fat cheese, sour cream, cottage cheese, yoghurt, and zero-trans-fat margarine instead of the high-fat versions. Try low-fat ice cream or frozen yoghurt for dessert.

Reduce the amount of salad dressing, mayonnaise, butter, and other high-fat condiments you use. Try the low-fat versions of these foods or substitute other things, such as fresh lemon juice or vinegar and spices on a salad, mustard on a sandwich, or salsa on a baked potato.

Choose the leanest cuts of meat you can find. Buy lean ground beef, skinless chicken, and other lower-fat cuts. Trim all visible fat from meats.

Avoid fried food. Fried foods are high in saturated and trans fats. Substitute French fries for a baked potato; get grilled fish or chicken instead of fried.

Eat healthy snacks. Instead of crisps or sweets, snack on fruit, pretzels, whole-grain crackers, or vegetables.

Be careful with low-fat or reduced-fat foods. Just because something is labelled "low fat" doesn't mean it doesn't have any calories. Check portion sizes and eat everything in moderation.

Eating a healthy diet doesn't mean sacrificing your favourite foods or severely limiting the amount of food you eat. Instead, building a healthy diet is about choosing the best food for your body—food with the nutrients your body needs to be at its best.

This article was written in collaboration with Deborah Borchers.

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