

Manage Your Health: One Step at a Time

Easy Tips for Planning a Healthy Diet and Sticking To It

Healthy eating is not about strict nutrition philosophies, staying unrealistically thin, or depriving yourself of the foods you love. Rather, it's about feeling great, having more energy, and keeping yourself as healthy as possible— all of which can be achieved by learning some nutrition basics and using them in a way that works for you.

Healthy eating begins with learning how to “eat smart”—it's not just *what* you eat, but *how* you eat. Your food choices can reduce your risk of illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, as well as defend against depression. Additionally, learning the habits of healthy eating can boost your energy, sharpen your memory and stabilize your mood. You can expand your range of healthy food choices and learn how to plan ahead to create and maintain a satisfying, healthy eating plan.



Healthy eating tip 1: Set yourself up for success

To set yourself up for success, think about planning a healthy diet as a number of small, manageable steps rather than one big drastic change. If you approach the changes gradually and with commitment, you will have a healthy diet sooner than you think.

- **Simplify.** Instead of being overly concerned with counting calories or measuring portion sizes, think of your diet in terms of color, variety and freshness—then it should be easier to make healthy choices. Focus on finding foods you love and easy recipes that incorporate a few fresh ingredients. Gradually, your diet will become healthier and more delicious.
- **Start slow and make changes to your eating habits over time.** Trying to make your diet healthy overnight isn't realistic or smart. Make small steps, like adding a salad (full of different color vegetables) to your diet once a day or switching from butter to olive oil when cooking. As your small changes become habit, you can continue to add more healthy choices to your diet.
- **Every change you make to improve your diet matters.** You don't have to be perfect and you don't have to completely eliminate foods you enjoy to have a healthy diet. The long term goal is to feel good, have more energy and reduce the risk of cancer and disease. Don't let your missteps derail you—every healthy food choice you make counts.

Think of water and exercise as food groups in your diet.

Water. Water helps flush our systems of waste products and toxins. Yet many people go through life dehydrated—causing tiredness, low energy and headaches. It’s common to mistake thirst for hunger, so staying well hydrated will also help you make healthier food choices.

Exercise. Find something active that you like to do and add it to your day, just like you would add healthy greens, berries or salmon. The benefits of lifelong exercise are abundant and regular exercise may even motivate you to make healthy food choices a habit.

Healthy eating tip 2: Moderation is key

People often think of healthy eating as an all or nothing proposition, but a key foundation for any healthy diet is moderation. Despite what certain fad diets would have you believe, we all need a balance of carbohydrates, protein, fat, fiber, vitamins, and minerals to sustain a healthy body.

- **Try not to think of certain foods as “off limits.”** When you ban certain foods or food groups, it is natural to want those foods more, and then feel like a failure if you give in to temptation. If you are drawn towards sweet, salty, or unhealthy foods, start by reducing portion sizes and not eating them as often. Later you may find yourself craving them less or thinking of them as only occasional indulgences.
- **Think smaller portions.** Serving sizes have ballooned recently, particularly in restaurants. When dining out, choose a starter instead of an entrée, split a dish with a friend, and don’t order supersized anything. At home, use smaller plates, think about serving sizes in realistic terms and start small. Visual cues can help with portion sizes—your serving of meat, fish or chicken should be the size of a deck of cards, and a teaspoon of oil or salad dressing is about the size of a large grape.

Healthy eating tip 3: It's not just what you eat, it's how you eat

Healthy eating is about more than the food on your plate—it is also about how you *think* about food. Healthy eating habits can be learned and it is important to slow down and think about food as nourishment rather than just something to gulp down in between meetings or on the way to pick up the kids.

- **Eat with others whenever possible.** Eating with other people has numerous social and emotional benefits—particularly for children—and allows you to model healthy eating habits. Eating in front of the TV or computer often leads to mindless overeating.
- **Take time to chew your food and enjoy mealtimes.** Chew your food slowly, savoring every bite. We tend to rush through our meals, forgetting to actually taste the flavors and feel the textures of what is in our mouths. Reconnect with the joy of eating.
- **Listen to your body.** Ask yourself if you are really hungry, or have a glass of water to see if you are thirsty instead of hungry. During a meal, stop eating before you feel full. It actually takes a few minutes for your brain to tell your body that it has had enough food, so eat slowly.

- **Eat breakfast, and eat smaller meals throughout the day.** A healthy breakfast can jumpstart your metabolism, and eating small, healthy meals throughout the day (rather than the standard three large meals) keeps your energy up and your metabolism going.

Healthy eating tip 4: Fill up on colorful fruits and vegetables



Fruits and vegetables are the foundation of a healthy diet—they are low in calories and nutrient dense, which means they are packed with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fiber.

Fruits and vegetables should be part of every meal and your first choice for a snack—aim for a minimum of five portions each day. The antioxidants and other nutrients in fruits and vegetables help protect against certain types of cancer and other diseases.

Eat a rainbow of fruits and vegetables every day—the brighter the better.

The brighter, deeper colored fruits and vegetables contain higher concentrations of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants—and different colors provide different benefits. Some great choices are:

- **Greens:** Greens are packed with calcium, magnesium, iron, potassium, zinc, vitamins A, C, E and K, and they help strengthen the blood and respiratory systems. Be adventurous with your greens and branch out beyond bright and dark green lettuce—kale, mustard greens, broccoli, Chinese cabbage are just a few of the options.
- **Sweet vegetables:** Naturally sweet vegetables add healthy sweetness to your meals and reduce your cravings for other sweets. Some examples of sweet vegetables are corn, carrots, beets, sweet potatoes or yams, winter squash, and onions.
- **Fruit:** A wide variety of fruit is also vital to a healthy diet. Fruit provides fiber, vitamins and antioxidants. Berries are cancer-fighting, apples provide fiber, oranges and mangos offer vitamin C, and so on.

Don't forget to shop fresh and local whenever possible. The local farmer's market, fruit stand or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group are great ways to get access to fresh, local produce.

Healthy eating tip 5: Eat more healthy carbs and whole grains

Choose healthy carbohydrates and fiber sources, especially whole grains, for long lasting energy. In addition to being delicious and satisfying, whole grains protect against coronary heart disease, certain cancers, and diabetes.



A quick definition of healthy carbs and unhealthy carbs

Healthy carbs (sometimes known as good carbs) include whole grains, beans, fruits, and vegetables. Healthy carbs are digested slowly, helping you feel full longer and keeping blood sugar and insulin levels stable.

Unhealthy carbs (or bad carbs) are foods such as white flour, refined sugar and white rice that have been stripped of all bran, fiber and nutrients. Unhealthy carbs digest quickly and cause spikes in blood sugar levels and energy.

Tips for eating more healthy carbs

- **Include a variety of whole grains in your healthy diet**, including whole wheat, brown rice, millet, quinoa, and barley. Experiment with different grains to find your favorites.
- **Make sure you're really getting whole grains.** Be aware that the words stone-ground, multi-grain, 100% wheat, or bran, can be deceptive. Look for the words “whole grain” or “100% whole wheat” at the beginning of the ingredient list. In the US, check for the Whole Grain Stamps that distinguish between partial whole grain and 100% whole grain.
- **Try mixing grains as a first step to switching to whole grains.** If whole grains, like brown rice and whole wheat pasta, don't sound good at first, start by mixing what you normally use with the whole grains. You can gradually increase the whole grain to 100%.



Avoid: Refined foods such as breads, pastas, and breakfast cereals that are not whole grain.

Healthy eating tip 6: Enjoy healthy fats & avoid unhealthy fats

Good sources of healthy fat are needed to nourish your brain, heart and cells, as well as your hair, skin, and nails. Foods rich in certain omega-3 fats called EPA and DHA are particularly important and can reduce cardiovascular disease, improve your mood and help prevent dementia.

Add to your healthy diet:

- **Monounsaturated fats**, from plant oils like canola oil, peanut oil, and olive oil, as well as avocados, nuts (like almonds, hazelnuts, and pecans), and seeds (such as pumpkin, sesame).
- **Polyunsaturated fats, including Omega-3 and Omega-6** fatty acids, found in fatty fish such as salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, and some cold water fish oil supplements. Other sources of polyunsaturated fats are unheated sunflower, corn, soybean, and flaxseed oils, and walnuts.

Reduce or eliminate from your diet:

- **Saturated fats**, found primarily in animal sources including red meat and whole milk dairy products.
- **Trans fats**, found in vegetable shortenings, some margarines, crackers, candies, cookies, snack foods, fried foods, baked goods, and other processed foods made with partially hydrogenated vegetable oils.

Healthy eating tip 7: Put protein in perspective

Protein gives us the energy to get up and go—and keep going. Protein in food is broken down into the 20 amino acids that are the body’s basic building blocks for growth and energy, and essential for maintaining cells, tissues, and organs. A lack of protein in our diet can slow growth, reduce muscle mass, lower immunity, and weaken the heart and respiratory system. Protein is particularly important for children, whose bodies are growing and changing daily.

Here are some guidelines for including protein in your healthy diet:

Try different types of protein. Whether or not you are a vegetarian, trying different protein sources—such as beans, nuts, seeds, peas, tofu and soy products—will open up new options for healthy mealtimes.

- Beans: Black beans, navy beans, garbanzos, and lentils are good options.
- Nuts: Almonds, walnuts, pistachios, and pecans are great choices.
- Soy products: Try veggie burgers, soy milk, tofu, and tempeh for a change.
- Avoid salted or sugary nuts and refried beans.



Downsize your portions of protein. Most people in the U.S. eat too much protein. Try to move away from protein being the center of your meal. Focus on equal servings of protein, whole grains, and vegetables.

Focus on quality sources of protein, like fresh fish, chicken or turkey, tofu, eggs, beans or nuts. When you are having meat, chicken, or turkey, buy meat that is free of hormones and antibiotics.

Healthy eating tip 8: Add calcium for strong bones

Calcium is one of the key nutrients that your body needs in order to stay strong and healthy. It is an essential building block for lifelong bone health in both men and women, among many other important functions. You and your bones will benefit from eating plenty of calcium-rich foods, limiting foods that deplete your body’s calcium stores, and getting your daily dose of magnesium and vitamins D and K—nutrients that help calcium do its job.

Recommended calcium levels are 1000 mg per day, 1200 mg if you are over 50 years old. Take a vitamin D and calcium supplement if you don't get enough of these nutrients from your diet.

Good sources of calcium include:

- **Dairy:** Dairy products are rich in calcium in a form that is easily digested and absorbed by the body. Sources include milk, yogurt, and cheese.
- **Vegetables and greens:** Many vegetables, especially leafy green ones, are rich sources of calcium. Try turnip greens, mustard greens, collard greens, kale, romaine lettuce, celery, broccoli, fennel, cabbage, summer squash, green beans, Brussels sprouts, and asparagus.
- **Beans:** For another rich source of calcium, try black beans, pinto beans, kidney beans, white beans, black-eyed peas, or baked beans.

Healthy eating tip 9: Limit sugar and salt

If you succeed in planning your diet around fiber-rich fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, and good fats, you may find yourself naturally cutting back on foods that can get in the way of your healthy diet—sugar and salt.

Sugar causes energy ups and downs and can add to health and weight problems. Unfortunately, reducing the amount of candy, cakes, and desserts we eat is only part of the solution. Often you may not even be aware of the amount of sugar you're consuming each day. Large amounts of added sugar can be hidden in foods such as bread, canned soups and vegetables, pasta sauce, margarine, instant mashed potatoes, frozen dinners, fast food, soy sauce, and ketchup. Here are some tips:

- **Avoid sugary drinks.** One 12-oz soda has about 10 teaspoons of sugar in it, more than the daily recommended limit! Try sparkling water with lemon or a splash of fruit juice.
- **Eat naturally sweet food** such as fruit, peppers, or natural peanut butter to satisfy your sweet tooth.

Check food labels carefully. Sugar is often disguised using terms such as:

- cane sugar or maple syrup
- corn sweetener or corn syrup
- honey or molasses
- brown rice syrup
- crystallized or evaporated cane juice
- fruit juice concentrates, such as apple or pear
- maltodextrin (or dextrin)
- Dextrose, Fructose, Glucose, Maltose, or Sucrose

Salt: Most of us consume too much salt in our diets. Eating too much salt can cause high blood pressure and lead to other health problems. Try to limit sodium intake to 1,500 to 2,300 mg per day, the equivalent of one teaspoon of salt.

- **Avoid processed or pre-packaged foods.** Processed foods like canned soups or frozen dinners contain hidden sodium that quickly surpasses the recommended limit.

- **Be careful when eating out.** Most restaurant and fast food meals are loaded with sodium. Check or ask about the nutritional content of meal choices.
- **Opt for fresh or frozen vegetables** instead of canned vegetables.
- **Cut back on salty snacks** such as potato chips, nuts, and pretzels.
- **Choose low-salt or reduced-sodium products.**
- **Try slowly reducing the salt in your diet** to give your taste buds time to adjust.

Healthy eating tip 10: Plan quick and easy meals ahead

Healthy eating starts with great planning. You will have won half the healthy diet battle if you have a well-stocked kitchen, a stash of quick and easy recipes, and plenty of healthy snacks.

Plan your meals by the week or even the month

One of the best ways to have a healthy diet is to prepare your own food and eat in regularly. Pick a few healthy recipes that you and your family like and build a meal schedule around them. If you have three or four meals planned per week and eat leftovers on the other nights, you will be much farther ahead than if you are eating out or having frozen dinners most nights.

Shop the perimeter of the grocery store

In general, healthy eating ingredients are found around the outer edges of most grocery stores—fresh fruits and vegetables, fish and poultry, whole grain breads and dairy products. The centers of many grocery stores are filled with overpriced, processed foods that aren't good for you.



Shop the perimeter of the store for most of your groceries (fresh items), add a few things from the freezer section (frozen fruits and vegetables), and the aisles with spices, oils, and whole grains (like rolled oats, brown rice, whole wheat pasta).

Cook when you can



Try to cook one or both weekend days or on a weekday evening and make extra to freeze or set aside for another night. Cooking ahead saves time and money, and it is gratifying to know that you have a home cooked meal waiting to be eaten.

Challenge yourself to come up with two or three dinners that can be put together without going to the store—utilizing things in your pantry, freezer, and spice rack. A delicious dinner of whole grain pasta with a quick tomato sauce or a quick and easy black bean quesadilla on a whole wheat flour tortilla (among endless other recipes) could act as your go-to meal when you are just too busy to shop or cook.

Source: *Healthy Eating*. HELPGUIDE.org. http://www.helpguide.org/life/healthy_eating_diet.htm