



# Eating Healthy

Diet. For many of us this word lurks in the back of our minds for most of our waking hours. We worry about our health, our appearance, whether we're getting enough of the right foods or too much of the wrong ones, and how all of this will affect our bodies as we age. In fact, aside from whether or not you smoke, the most important factors determining your overall health are your eating habits and activity level. However, with the frenzied pace nearly all of us keep, nutrition is the first thing we let slip. Healthy eating is not as convenient as grabbing a burger from the drive-thru on our way to the next tightly scheduled activity. And unfortunately, the food we pick up at restaurants and cafeterias tends to be higher in calories, fat, cholesterol and sodium, and lower in fiber, calcium and iron, which most of us need to consume more often.

Food for thought. It takes some extra time, but planning and preparing healthy meals and snacks can add years to your life. In a Harvard School of Public Health study, men whose diets closely followed the guidelines in the Healthy Eating Pyramid were 20 percent less likely to develop a major chronic disease, and women 11 percent less likely, than their peers who did not follow the Healthy Eating guidelines closely. Men whose diets most closely followed the Healthy Eating Pyramid lowered their risk of cardiovascular disease by nearly 40 percent, and women whose diets followed it closely lowered their risk by almost 30 percent. So for a little extra

effort now, you can reap great benefits in the years ahead.

Meat vs. potatoes? With different diets coming into vogue every year or so, it's hard to sift through all the conflicting messages about what we should really be eating. Is it healthiest to cut out all carbohydrates in favor of steaks and eggs? Would we do better without any meat in our diets? A healthy diet isn't as simple as eliminating entire food groups. All types of food add various nutrients that our bodies need. The key is in getting the right balance of all of the food groups.

## Keeping calories low when you're on the go

When eating out, it can be hard to get the nutrients you need. Here are some tips for healthy eating away from home.

- Order water or unsweetened tea instead of drinks with added sugar.
- Start your meal with a salad (with dressing on the side) to help control hunger and make you feel satisfied sooner.
- Choose dishes that include vegetables, even if it's only pasta with tomato sauce.
- Order steamed, grilled or broiled dishes instead of those that are fried or sautéed.
- For commutes or errands, prepare and pack fresh fruit or vegetables, low-fat string cheese, or a handful of unsalted nuts.
- Avoid buffets, and order "small" or half-sized portions when they are offered. Or, ask for half of your food to be packaged to go when you order.
- Order fruit when those around you are ordering dessert.

The best way to get the right balance is as follows :

- Whole grains. The best source for the energy-loaded carbohydrates your body needs are whole grains like oatmeal, whole wheat bread, and brown rice. Your body digests whole grains more slowly than it does processed carbohydrates like those found in food made with white flour.
- Plant oils. Most of us get at least a third of our daily calories from fats. Good sources of healthy unsaturated fats include olive, canola, corn, sunflower, peanut and other vegetable oils, as well as fatty fish like salmon. These healthy fats improve cholesterol levels, when eaten in place of highly processed carbohydrates.
- Vegetables and fruits. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables can lower your risk of heart attack, stroke, cancer, vision loss, and a host of other health conditions.
- Fish, poultry and eggs. These are excellent sources of protein.
- Nuts, seeds, beans and tofu. These plantbased foods are excellent sources of protein, fiber, vitamins and minerals.
- Low-fat dairy (one to two servings per day), or vitamin D/calcium supplement. Calcium is important, but the saturated fats in dairy foods make it important to choose low-fat or fat free milk and cheese, or to use a calcium supplement instead.
- Red meat and butter (use sparingly). These foods also contain a lot of saturated fat. Fish, poultry, beans and olive oil are good substitutes.
- Refined grains, sugary drinks and sweets, potatoes and salt (use sparingly). These foods cause rapid increases in blood sugar that can lead to weight gain, diabetes, heart disease and other chronic disorders.

- Multivitamin with extra vitamin D (daily). A vitamin supplement can't replace good eating habits, but it can ensure you get all the nutrients your body needs.
- Alcohol (for some people, in moderation). Research suggests that having an alcoholic drink a day lowers the risk of heart disease, but having more than that increases other health risks. Make sure you have no more than one (for women) or two (for men) alcoholic drinks in a day.

A "Mediterranean-style" diet most closely follows the guidelines stated above. Mediterranean diets include lots of fruits and vegetables, moderate amounts of unsaturated fats, and little saturated fat. A study conducted by Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital compared a low-fat diet to a Mediterranean-style diet, and found that, after 18 months, those on the low-fat diet had actually gained an average of six pounds, while those on the Mediterranean diet had lost an average of nine pounds. The Mediterranean diet was also found to be easier to stick with.

### Too much of a good thing

Even if we are striving to eat a balanced diet, improper portion sizes can work against us. Portion sizes at restaurants began to grow in the 1970s, rose sharply in the 1980s, and have continued to mirror increasing body weights. Familiarize yourself with what one serving of a given food looks like on a plate. Use smaller plates for your meals, and serve plates from the stove rather than from the table, so you think twice before having seconds.

## Resources

Visit [nutrition.gov](http://nutrition.gov) for recipes, weight management tips, calculators, tools and information to help you get the most out of your food. Or, click the "Nutrition" tab on the [HealthierUS.gov](http://HealthierUS.gov) site for recipes, tracking tools and menu planners.

