

Healthy Eating: A Whole Diet Approach.

The importance of a healthy and varied diet

A good diet is important for good health. A healthy and varied diet can help to maintain a healthy body weight, enhance general wellbeing and reduce the risk of a number of diseases including heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis.



What is a healthy diet?

A healthy diet is a diet based on breads, potatoes, and other cereals and is rich in fruits and vegetables. A healthy diet will include moderate amounts of milk and dairy products, meat, fish or meat/milk alternatives, and limited amounts of foods containing fat or sugar.

No single food can provide all the essential nutrients that the body needs. Therefore, it is important to consume a wide variety of foods to provide adequate intakes of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre, which are important for health.

The *Balance of Good Health*, putting advice into practice



The Government's *Balance of Good Health* (illustrated above) is a model of how to eat healthily and is based on the 8 guidelines for a healthy diet (see box below). It shows the types and proportions of different foods that should be eaten over a period of time. The *Balance of Good Health* applies to all healthy individuals over five years of age, and can be gradually applied for pre-school children, but does not apply to individuals with special dietary requirements. If you are under medical supervision you should check with your doctor to see whether you should use this guide.

8 guidelines for a healthy diet

- Enjoy your food
- Eat a variety of different foods
- Eat the right amount to be a healthy weight
- Eat plenty of foods rich in starch and fibre
- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables
- Don't eat too many foods that contain a lot of fat
- Don't have sugary foods and drinks too often
- If you drink alcohol, drink sensibly

You should choose a variety of foods from each of these four food groups every day:

- Bread, other cereals and potatoes
- Fruit and vegetables
- Milk and dairy foods
- Meat, fish and alternatives

Foods in the fifth group, i.e. foods containing fat and foods containing sugar, can be eaten sparingly as part of a healthy balanced diet but should not be eaten instead of foods from the other food groups, or too often or in large amounts. Having a variety of foods in the diet is important for health – it is not necessary to follow the model at every meal, but rather over a day or two.

Fruit and vegetables

What counts?

Fresh, frozen, dried and canned fruit and vegetables all count. Also, 100% fruit or vegetable juice and pure fruit juice smoothies count. Beans and pulses, such as baked beans and lentils also contribute to this group.

How much should you eat?

Most of us should **EAT MORE!**

Choose a wide variety and aim to eat at least 5 different portions a day. A portion is approximately 80g (e.g. 1 medium apple, a cereal bowl of salad or 3 heaped tablespoons of peas). Servings of fruit juice, vegetable juice or smoothies can only count as one portion per day no matter how much you drink. Beans and pulses (i.e. haricot, kidney, baked, soya and butter beans, chickpeas and lentils) only count once per day no matter how many different types you eat.

Look out for the Government's 5 A Day logo on pre-packed fruit and vegetables; some food manufacturers have their own logos.



Why eat these foods?

These foods provide:

Vitamin C: needed for healthy skin and tissue, also to aid the absorption of iron

Carotenenes: required for growth and development

Folate*: needed for red blood cells

Fibre: keeps the gut healthy and helps prevent constipation

Carbohydrate: a source of energy

Phytochemicals:** may help protect against some diseases

Healthy eating tips

- Choose fruit or chopped vegetables as a snack
- Add dried or fresh fruit to breakfast cereals
- Have a salad with sandwiches or with pizza
- Add vegetables to casseroles and stews and fruit to desserts
- Try not to eat the same fruits and vegetables every day

* Folic acid (400µg/day) supplements (a form of folate) are recommended for women of childbearing age, up until the 12th week of pregnancy.

** Phytochemicals, also known as bioactive substances, are compounds commonly found in plant foods that are not considered to be nutrients but may have beneficial effects on health, helping to protect against a number of diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

Breads, other cereals and potatoes

What counts?

This food group, sometimes referred to as 'starchy carbohydrates', includes bread, potatoes (including low fat oven chips), yams, breakfast cereals, pasta, rice, oats, noodles, maize, millet and cornmeal.

How much should you eat?

Most of us should **EAT MORE!**

Base a third of your food intake on foods from this group, aiming to include at least one food from this group at each meal, e.g. potatoes with fish and vegetables, a chicken salad sandwich, stir-fried vegetables with rice, or porridge oats for breakfast.

Potatoes, yams, plantains and sweet potato fall into this group, rather than fruit and vegetables, because they contain starchy carbohydrates.

Why eat these foods?

These foods provide:

Carbohydrate: a source of energy

Fibre: keeps the gut healthy and helps prevent constipation

Some **calcium:** required for the development and maintenance of healthy bones

Some **iron:** needed for healthy red blood cells

B vitamins: e.g. thiamin and niacin – which help the body use energy

Folate*: needed for red blood cells

Healthy eating tips

- Base your meals around foods from this group
- Eat wholegrain or wholemeal breads, pastas and cereals as well as white choices
- Choose low fat oven chips rather than fried chips (oven chips fall into this food group but fried chips don't)
- Eating more foods from this group will help to reduce the proportion of fat and increase the amount of fibre in the diet
- Avoid frying or adding too much fat to these foods

* Folic acid (400µg/day) supplements (a form of folate) are recommended for women of childbearing age, up until the 12th week of pregnancy.

Milk and dairy foods

What counts?

This food group includes milk, cheese, yogurt and fromage frais. Calcium fortified soya alternatives to milk can also be included. This group does not include butter, eggs and cream as these fall into other food groups.

How much should you eat?

EAT MODERATE AMOUNTS

Try to eat 2-3 servings a day. A serving of milk is a 200ml glass, a serving of yogurt is a small pot (150g), a serving of cheese is 30g (matchbox size). Choose lower fat versions whenever you can, such as semi-skimmed milk, low fat yogurt and reduced fat cheese.

Why eat these foods?

These foods provide:

Calcium: needed for development and maintenance of healthy bones

Zinc: required for tissue growth and repair

Protein: needed for growth and repair, and also a source of energy

Vitamin B₁₂: required for blood cells and nerve function

Vitamin B₂: needed for the release of energy from carbohydrates and protein

Vitamin A: (in whole milk products) for growth, development and eyesight

Healthy eating tips

- Choose low fat milk i.e. semi-skimmed or skimmed milk
- Choose low fat yogurts and reduced fat cheeses

Meat, fish and alternatives

What counts?

This food group includes meat, poultry, fish, eggs and alternatives (see below). Meat products include bacon, salami, sausages, beef burgers and pâté. Fish includes frozen and canned fish such as sardines and tuna, fish fingers and fish cakes.

How much should you eat?

EAT MODERATE AMOUNTS

Choose lower fat versions whenever you can. Some meat products, e.g. beefburgers and sausages, can be high in fat. Trim visible fat off meat where possible. The Government recommends that we eat two portions of fish each week, one of which should be an oily fish (e.g. salmon, mackerel, trout, sardines or fresh tuna).

Alternatives

These include nuts, tofu, mycoprotein, textured vegetable protein (TVP), beans such as kidney beans and canned baked beans, and pulses such as lentils. These foods provide protein, fibre and iron but unlike those listed above are not a rich source of zinc and generally provide no vitamin B₁₂ (unless fortified).

Why eat these foods?

These foods provide:

Protein: needed for growth and repair, also a source of energy

Iron: especially red meat, needed for healthy red blood cells

B Vitamins: especially vitamin B₁₂ (required for blood cells and nerve function)

Vitamin D: in meat, required for healthy bones

Zinc: required for tissue growth and repair

Magnesium: helps the body use energy. Needed for healthy tissues and bones

Omega-3 fatty acids: in oily fish, may help protect against heart disease

Healthy eating tips

- Choose lower fat meat products
- Choose lean cuts of meat
- Cut visible fat including skin from meat and poultry and drain away fat after cooking
- Try to grill, roast or microwave meat and fish rather than frying
- Eat oily fish once a week

Foods containing fat and foods containing sugar

Foods containing fat: what counts?

Margarine, butter, other spreading fats and low fat spreads, cooking oils, oil-based salad dressings, mayonnaise, cream, fried foods including fried chips, chocolate, crisps, biscuits, pastries, cake, puddings, ice-cream, rich sauces and gravies are all in this food group because they contain fat.

Foods containing sugar: what counts?

Soft drinks (not diet drinks), sweets, jam and sugar, as well as foods such as cakes, puddings, biscuits, pastries and ice-cream.

How much should you eat?

Most people need to **EAT LESS!**

It is essential to have a small amount of fat in the diet, but eat foods containing fat sparingly as they are high in energy. Look out for reduced fat or low fat alternatives (by law any food labelled as low fat must contain no more than 3g of fat per 100g). Fats can be divided into saturates, monounsaturates and polyunsaturates.

Limit consumption of saturates, associated with animal products, cakes, biscuits and pastries, to reduce risk of heart disease. To cut down on saturates, make use of the information on nutrition panels on food products, cut off visible fat from meat and poultry, choose lower fat meat and dairy products, and where fat is needed in cooking use it sparingly.

Choose fats and oils containing monounsaturates (e.g. olive and rapeseed oils) and polyunsaturates (e.g. sunflower, corn and rapeseed oils) instead of saturates. In moderation these are not associated with an increased risk of heart disease – but still use them sparingly. There are two types of essential fats, which must be supplied by the diet in small amounts: omega-3 fatty acids (e.g. found in oily fish, walnuts, omega-3 enriched eggs, and rapeseed and soya oil) and omega-6 fatty acids (e.g. found in vegetable oils such as sunflower, corn and soya oil and spreads made from these).

Sugar adds flavour and sweetness to foods, but frequent consumption of sugar-containing foods and drinks is associated with an increased tendency towards tooth decay.

Healthy eating tips

- Eat small quantities of these foods
- Choose low fat or reduced sugar foods where possible
- Use spreads and oils sparingly – opt for vegetable fats and oils
- Try to limit consumption of sugar-containing foods and drinks between meals
- Try not to add fat to foods when cooking

What about salt?

Salt is needed for the body to function properly. However, many of us consume much more than is needed. The Government recommends that the average intake of salt should be reduced by a third to 6g/day for adults; less for children. Choose foods that are low in salt, and try to avoid adding salt to foods during cooking and at the table. Sodium is often labelled on foods rather than salt - to roughly convert sodium to salt simply multiply the sodium figure by 2.5.

What about supplements?

For most healthy people, a varied and balanced diet will provide all the vitamins and minerals the body needs. There are certain times in our lives when we may benefit from taking supplements but remember supplements cannot replace a healthy diet. If you think that your diet is not meeting your nutrient requirements, a multivitamin and mineral supplement may be of benefit. Avoid supplements with high doses of single vitamins or minerals as these may well be unnecessary and should not be taken without seeking medical advice.

What about fluids?

The amount of fluid we need varies from person to person - age, climate, diet and physical activity all have an influence. Intakes of 1.5 to 2 litres of fluids a day are recommended in temperate climates and this includes water and other drinks like squash, fruit juices, tea and coffee. Some of our fluid requirement comes from the food we eat, rather than drinks - this counts too.

What about alcohol?

Drink sensibly! This means a maximum of 3-4 units per day for men and 2-3 units per day for women. A unit is 25ml of spirits (standard pub measure), 125ml (small glass) of wine or half a pint of standard strength lager, beer or cider. Drinking more than recommended can have adverse effects on your health. Avoid binge drinking in particular.

What about pregnancy?

Pregnant women should follow a healthy balanced diet at all times, however specific dietary advice exists with regards to a number of foods.

What about Phytochemicals?

Phytochemicals, also known as bioactive substances, are compounds commonly found in plant foods that are not considered to be nutrients but may have beneficial effects on health, helping to protect against a number of diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

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